

# «LIKE FLOWERS BENEATH THE ANCIENT SONG».

## LANGUAGE AND MYTH IN OWEN BARFIELD AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN

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**ABSTRACT.** This article aims, first, to analyse the linguistic theories of Owen Barfield and J.R.R. Tolkien, examining in particular the influence that the former had on the academic and artistic production of the latter. Later it will try to understand how linguistic theory enters Tolkien's narrative work and finds expression there. At the same time, an attempt will be made to interpret the theories of Barfield and Tolkien in the light of contemporary paradigms, including Performance Studies and Giovanni Bottirolì's Theory of Thought Styles.

**KEYWORDS:** J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, Philosophy of Language, Aesthetics, Performance Studies

«Mythology is language  
and language is mythology»  
J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories* (ms. A, 1939)

To Roberto Arduini, with Friendship

### **INTRODUCTION: «THE LANGUAGE [...] LEARNED OF ELVES»**

To say that Bilbo's breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words left to describe his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful. Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before, but the splendour, the lust, the glory of such treasure had never yet come home to him. His heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves, and he gazed motionless, almost forgetting

the frightful guardian, at the gold beyond price and count<sup>1</sup>.



his passage from *The Hobbit* describes Bilbo Baggins' reaction to the sight of Smaug, the last dragon of

Middle-earth: a creature emerging from a legendary past that the protagonist is only now fully experiencing. And it is a vision of such terrible wonder that it could not be described through language as it has become in the Third Age of Arda. The world, in fact, has lost the wonderfulness of its ancient days, and language has forgotten the words to define it.

In a letter to the publisher Allen & Unwin, J.R.R. Tolkien observed that this passage constituted «the only philological remark (I think) in *The Hobbit* [...]: an odd mythological way of referring to linguistic philosophy, and a point that will (happily) be missed by any who have not read Barfield (few have), and probably by those who have»<sup>2</sup>.

As well as a writer, Tolkien was a philologist and a scholar of Anglo-Saxon language and literature. He took his first steps between the end of the “golden age” of Philology and the beginning of the era of structural and analytical Linguistics, with the Great War acting as a watershed<sup>3</sup>. In many ways, Tolkien considered himself «an “old school” philologist»<sup>4</sup>, therefore he could find no agreement with the new trends in logical studies on language<sup>5</sup>; but he did not even agree with the reductionist approach of the philologists who had preceded him. His thought, as we will see in these pages, was based on some fun-

damental assumptions, including a greater consideration of language as expression rather than communication, the idea of an ancient correspondence between the sound and the meaning of words, the belief in a recursive relation between language and myth. An intense reflection on these issues had been initiated in Germany by Ernst Cassirer – with *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910) and above all *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-1929) – and in England by Owen Barfield, whose essay *Poetic Diction. A Study in Meaning* (1928) aroused great interest in Tolkien, as evidenced by a letter to Barfield written by Clive Staples Lewis – a mutual friend of the two:

You might like to know that when Tolkien dined with me the other night he said *à propos* of something quite different that your conception of the ancient semantic unity had modified his whole outlook and that he was always just going to say something in a lecture when your conception stopped him in time. “It is one of those things,” he said “that when you’ve once seen it there are all sorts of things you can never say again.”<sup>6</sup>

Tolkien Studies have rightly emphasized the importance of this document. Stephen Medcalf argued that «Barfield’s book *Poetic Diction* gave Tolkien a philosophy to account for, and to some extent satisfy, what was perhaps his deepest concern: our lack of a language to describe wonder, and the related fading of wonderfulness in our world»<sup>7</sup>; Verlyn Flieger even claimed that «saving the *Beowulf* poet, Barfield’s theory of the interdependence of myth and language is the primary influence on Tolkien’s mythos»<sup>8</sup>.

Barfield graduated in Oxford with a First in English and a Bachelor’s in Literature, from whose thesis he would later develop *Poetic Diction*. In his university years, he

1 H, p. 271.

2 *Letters*, n. 15.

3 Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* came out posthumously in 1916, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921.

4 Smith 2007, p. 136.

5 Cf. *Ivi*, p. 145: «He could not possibly accept that the languages fashioned and perfected by peoples in so many different times and places in the course of human development, containing such infinite variation and subtlety, were no more than shadows, pale and inadequate, of some true linguistic system in which philosophers could achieve untainted communication, and he made as many allusions as he deemed fit in his fiction to the whole range of subjects prohibited by the positivists: faith, belief, divine redemption and reward, goodness and wickedness».

6 Carpenter 1978 [2006], p. 42.

7 Medcalf 1999, p. 31.

8 Flieger 2002, p. 21.

met C.S. Lewis, who later introduced him to Tolkien. The three had sporadic encounters even before the circle of friends that would become famous under the name of Inklings was formed<sup>9</sup>. At the meetings of this group – which included, in addition to Lewis and Tolkien, personalities such as Charles Williams, Hugo Dyson and Nevil Coghill – Barfield rarely participated and was never able to attend the readings of *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien offered to friends while he was composing the novel. If on a personal level the relationships between Tolkien and Barfield do not seem either continuous or in-depth, on the literary and philosophical level the encounter with *Poetic Diction* constitutes a topic moment in the thought of the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.



FIG. 1. OWEN BARFIELD



FIG. 2. C.S. LEWIS

The purpose of these pages is, first, to analyse the linguistic theories of Barfield and Tolkien, examining the influence that the former had on the academic and artistic production of the latter. At the same time, an attempt will be made to interpret these theories in the light of contemporary paradigms, including Performance Studies and Giovanni Bottirolì's Theory of Thought Styles<sup>10</sup>.

### 1 - «FLASHING, IRIDESCENT SHAPES LIKE FLAMES»: BARFIELD'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

In the second edition of *Poetic Diction*, Barfield defines his work «not merely a theory of poetic diction, but a theory of poetry: and not merely a theory of poetry, but a theory of knowledge»<sup>11</sup>. It can be said, with a certain amount of truth, that his essay aspires to construct *a theory of knowledge through poetry*. This theory is based on two assumptions which, as we shall see, will also be shared to some extent by Tolkien:

Firstly, [...] words have a life of their own; the meanings of single words can grow, shrink or change radically over time, always carrying a trace of their previous avatars. Secondly, we must not project our own 21st century consciousness, our present way of thinking – indeed the way of thinking prevalent in any historical age – onto those living in preceding ages, and particularly onto the minds of humans living at the dawn of language and intellect, whose thought processes and modes of perception must necessarily have been utterly different from ours<sup>12</sup>.

These two presuppositions are strictly interconnected and consequential: the first constitutes the theoretical basis on which Barfield outlines his theory of the “ancient semantic unity”, intended as a linguistic vehicle of a world-vision radically different from the contemporary one; the second points to a widespread perspective error of modernity which he defines as “logomorphism” and which

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Tennyson 1990, p. 548.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schechner 2004, 2013; Tomasello 2021; Tomasello, Vescovo 2021; Bottirolì 2007, 2013, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Smith 2007, p. 125.

consists in «projecting post-logical thoughts back into a pre-logical age»<sup>13</sup>.

The starting point of *Poetic Diction* is a reflection on the relations between the language and the world. Undoubtedly, Barfield receives from romantic culture – in particular from German Comparative Philology<sup>14</sup> and from Coleridge's poetic-philosophical theories – the idea that the phenomena of the world are essentially brought into being by the words that designate them. The role of perception, consciousness and language is expounded by Barfield in these terms:

The most elementary distinctions of form and colour are only apprehended by us with the help of concepts which we have come to unite with the pure sense-datum. And these concepts we acquire and fix, as we grow up, with the help of words [...]. On the basis of past perceptions, using language as a kind of storehouse, we gradually build up our ideas, and it is only these which enable us to become 'conscious', as human beings, of the world around us<sup>15</sup>.

Barfield evidently considers both the ontogenesis and the phylogenesis. The world before the child and the "infancy of civilization", though not being reified as an object-substance, is nevertheless willing to be invested with meaning, to be transformed from *Welt* to *Umwelt*: the knowledge of the world is, therefore, an expansion of human consciousness – «where 'consciousness' embraces all my awareness of my surroundings at any given moment, and 'surroundings' includes my own feelings»<sup>16</sup>. The phenomena of the world, therefore, pass from the senses to the consciousness, which makes them intelligible and organized<sup>17</sup>. But, given their heterogeneity, they cannot be ordered once for all. They need instead to

be continuously reordered. It therefore happens that man establishes relations between the phenomena of the world and, furthermore, between these phenomena and his own conscience; in these relations, the approximation, the indeterminacy, the creation of even the most unusual associations are essential conditions to allow man to recognize, relate, and remember the forms that are offered to him in the indeterminacy of the perceptions<sup>18</sup>. As Barfield affirms:

Men do not *invent* those mysterious relationships between separate external objects and between objects and feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker<sup>19</sup>.

Starting from these assumptions, Barfield questions the role of language. He resolutely rejects the idea – predominant among scholars of his time – that early days' language was made up of "simple", purely perceptive terms which would later be used to designate abstract concepts through a process of metaphorical extension of the meaning. Barfield emphasizes the implications of such an idea, which would make any modern language nothing more than «an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors»<sup>20</sup>.

A first argument that he puts forward in support of his thesis is of a purely aesthetic nature, as can be expected from an author so sensitive to poetry: if language, over time, had become more and more metaphorical – and therefore, one would say, *more poetic* –, it should generate more aesthetic pleasure in the present than it did in antiquity:

13 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 83. This is, as we shall see *infra*, the same perspective error that Tolkien attributes to modern philologists in his essay on *Beowulf*.

14 Comparative Philology (*vergleichende Philologie*) receives an ideal birth certificate with the publication of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819-1826).

15 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 49.

16 *Ivi*, p. 40.

17 It is on very similar premises that today's Cognitive Archaeology has moved towards the investigation of the entanglement between man and the things that surround him – an approach that can be summarized in the iconic formula «organism plus environment» (Knappett 2005, p. 16). Cf. Ingold 2000, p. 20.

18 Cf. Cardona 2019: 7 f.

19 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 85 f.

20 *Ivi*, p. 55.

Yet if language had indeed advanced, by continual accretion of metaphor, from roots of speech with the simplest material reference, to the complex organism which we know today, it would surely be *today* that every author is a poet today, when a man cannot utter a dozen words without wielding the creations of a hundred named and nameless poets. Given the necessary consciousness of this (i.e. an historical knowledge of, and feeling for, language), our pleasure in such a sentence as for example 'I simply love that idea' should be infinitely more sublime than our pleasure as far as the language itself is concerned in reading Homer. How is it then that, in actual fact, we find this almost universal consciousness that the golden age of poetry is in the *infancy* of society? Bearing in mind our conclusion that *pleasure* in poetic diction depends on the difference between two planes or levels of consciousness, we can indeed see why language, at an early stage, should delight us. But what follows? If this theory of the growth of language, by means of metaphor, from simple perceptual meanings to complex psychic ones is a correct theory, it follows that our pleasure in such relatively primitive diction ought to be of a poor and unsatisfying nature, compared to our pleasure in the diction of a modern writer who wields these wonderful meanings<sup>21</sup>.

The object of Barfield's criticism emerges gradually: it's the theory of Friedrich Max Müller, one of the greatest authors of the "golden age" of Philology and the founder of Comparative Mythology<sup>22</sup>. He had proposed a fortunate distinction between *poetical* and *radical metaphors*: the former were metaphors in a proper sense, in which «a noun or verb, ready made and assigned to one definite object or action, [was] transferred poetically to another object or action»<sup>23</sup>; the others were monosyllabic, etymological "roots" with simple and effectual

referents from which new words would be formed. So, e.g., «a root which means to shine [was] applied to form the names, not only of the fire or the sun, but of the spring of the year, the morning light, the brightness of thought, or the joyous outburst of hymns of praise»<sup>24</sup>. In other words, according to Müller, the language proceeded through the *extraction* of the meaning from terms with concrete reference and its *application* to abstract concepts, in a conscious and aware process of metaphorization, i.e., of rhetorical extension of the "original" meaning.

Barfield firmly rejects this idea. He does not deny the existence of the "roots" or their ancient correlation with the phenomena of the physical world, but he refutes that they used to have only concrete meanings and then took on metaphorical ones. In a later work, he writes in fact:

The Hebrew language [...] is that one among the ancient languages in which the roots preserve most clearly (though still dimly enough) the old unity of sound and meaning. If we try to think of these roots as "words", then we must think of words with a potential rather than an actual meaning»<sup>25</sup>.

Therefore, *it is necessary to consider the "roots" as semantic potentialities rather than as meanings with clear and precise boundaries*. The "root" meaning "to shine" had to designate a unique «defined spiritual reality» which later «was beheld on the one hand in what has since become purely human thinking; and on the other hand, in what has since become physical light»<sup>26</sup>.

21 *Ivi*, p. 61 f.

22 On Müller and the Philology of his time, see Davis, Nicholls 2018.

23 Müller 1864 [2013], p. 353. On closer inspection, this is nothing more than a re-proposition of the famous definition of metaphor provided by Aristotle: «Metaphor is the application of a word belonging to something else either from the genus [*genos*] to a species [*eidos*], or from the species to the genus, or from the species to a species, or according to analogy [μεταφορά δέ ἐστιν ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορά ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ γένους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπὶ τὸ γένος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ κατὰ τὸ ἀνάλογον]» (*Poetics* 1457 b, ed. Bernardete, Davis 2002). This definition shows that Müller intended the metaphor as a mere transposition of meaning and therefore relegated it to the domain of the ornaments of discourse without considering that Aristotle himself had theorized its theoretical and cognitive values: «to make metaphors well is to contemplate what is like [εὖ μεταφέρειν τὸ τὸ ὅμοιον θεωρεῖν ἐστιν]» (*Poetics* 1459 a), «[a metaphor] creates understanding and knowledge [ἐποίησεν μάθεσιν καὶ γνῶσιν]» (*Rhetorics* III, 10, 1410 b, ed. Kennedy 2007). This conception is, therefore, interesting only to the extent that it testifies how in post-Aristotelian rhetoric «la metafora sia quasi sempre e soltanto intesa come: *translatio*, trasporto, trasferimento, trasposizione, *Übertragung*, *transport*, *transposition*, *transfert* ecc.» (Cicero 2012, p. 174).

24 Müller 1864 [2013], p. 353 f.

25 Barfield 1957 [[1984], p. 124.

26 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 81.

Another example that Müller cited in support of his thesis was given by the Latin word “spiritus”:

*Spiritus* in Latin meant originally blowing, or wind. But when the principle of life within man or animal had to be named, its outward sign, namely the breath of the mouth, was naturally chosen to express it. Hence in Sanskrit *asu*, breath and life; in Latin *spiritus*, breath and life. Again, when it was perceived that there was something else to be named, not the mere animal life, but that which was supported by this animal life, the same word was chosen, in the modern Latin dialects, to express the spiritual as opposed to the mere material or animal element in man. All this is a metaphor<sup>27</sup>.

There are three striking elements in this passage: the already examined idea that language evolved from simplicity to semantic complexity – which also shows all of Müller’s preconceptions regarding the “primitive” mind –; the arbitrariness attributed to the metaphorical extension of the “roots”<sup>28</sup>; the contrast between concrete and abstract and, therefore, between material and intellectual referents. Barfield counters in these terms:

We must, therefore, imagine a time when ‘spiritus’ or *πνεῦμα* or older words from which these had descended, meant neither *breath*, nor *wind*, nor *spirit*, nor yet all three of these things, but when they simply had *their own old peculiar meaning*, which has since, in the course of the evolution of consciousness, crystallized into the three meanings specified and no doubt into others also, for which separate words had already been found by Greek and Roman times<sup>29</sup>.

It follows with all evidence that to apprehend “πνεῦμα” or “spiritus” in only one of its meanings – be it the concrete or the abstract one – <is arbitrarily to isolate that meaning and that concept from the en-

tirety of meaning it must have originally expressed»<sup>30</sup>. What Barfield proposes, in short, is to imagine the history of language not as an evolution from simplicity to complexity – moreover artfully constructed by the speakers –, but *as an inherent flowing of the words from unity to semantic multiplicity, from homogeneity to the fragmentation of the meanings*<sup>31</sup>.

Criticizing the icy abstractness of Müller’s reconstructions, therefore, he argues as follows:

The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames – ever-trickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them. To the Locke-Müller-France way of thinking, on the contrary, they appear as solid chunks with definite boundaries and limits, to which other chunks may be added as occasion arises<sup>32</sup>

Given the ancient semantic unity of words, Barfield proposes a consideration of the greatest interest:

[The] poetic, and *apparently* ‘metaphorical’ values were latent in meaning from the beginning. In other words, you may imply [...] that the earliest words in use were ‘the names of sensible, material objects’ *and nothing more* – only, in that case, you must suppose the ‘sensible objects’ themselves to have been something more; you must suppose that they were not, as they appear to be at present, isolated, or detached, from thinking and feeling. Afterwards, in the development of language and thought, these single meanings split up into contrasted pairs – the abstract and the concrete, particular and general, objective and subjective. And the poesy felt by us to reside in ancient language consists just in this, that, out of our later, analytic, ‘subjective’ consciousness, a consciousness which has been brought with, and partly because of, this splitting up of meaning, we are led back to experience the original unity<sup>33</sup>.

27 Müller 1864 [2013], p. 386 f.

28 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 76, criticizes the vague but prolific idea, explicitly stated by Müller, of a “metaphorical period”, «a wonderful age when a race of anonymous and mighty poets took hold of a bald inventory and saturated it with poetic values».

29 *Ivi*, p. 73.

30 Flieger 2002, p. 39.

31 As noted by Smith 2007, p. 133, Barfield «cites Otto Jespersen’s arguments from his book *Progress in Language* (1894) to the effect that in fact languages have become simpler, not more complex, as civilisation has developed. Ancient Greek and Latin, for instance, to take two relatively recent examples, are considerably more complex in grammatical terms than their modern counterparts, or than modern English».

32 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 67. In addition to Müller’s works, the author here also refers to John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and Anatole France’s *Le Jardin d’Épicure* (1895).

33 *Ivi*, p. 77 f.

Barfield's idea that sensitive objects were in continuity with thought and feeling seems to anticipate, in a certain way, the reflection of Cognitive Science on the Extended Mind<sup>34</sup>. In this perspective it would be the world itself, as *Umwelt*, to present to the mind the metaphors under which to be known<sup>35</sup>. Hence Müller's radical metaphor, «instead of being primitive, is seen to be one of the latest achievements of conscious linguistic development»<sup>36</sup>. The "roots", in fact, more than the "germs of language" constitute the product of eras of intellectual abstraction carried forward unconsciously by speakers and consciously by grammarians and philologists.

Then we come to the myth, which according to Müller would only have been the fruit of a fallacious reification, of an undue linguistic misunderstanding of the metaphorical meanings assumed by the words:

Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is a danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, in a "mythopoeic" age – «a kind of Eocene period»<sup>38</sup> –, the observation of natural phenomena would thus have given rise to the Aryan and Greek divinities. Added to this was the idea – which, as we will see, will be widely criticized by Tolkien – that modern fairy-tales were nothing but a diminished survival of ancient myths:

The gods of ancient mythology were changed into the demigods and heroes of ancient epic poetry, and these demigods again became at a later age the principal characters in our nursery tales<sup>39</sup>.

Barfield could not consider myth a "disease of language". Myth is instead intimately linked to the ancient unity between world, perception, and language:

We find poet after poet expressing in metaphor and simile the analogy between death and sleep and winter, and again between birth and waking and summer, and these, once more, are constantly made the types of a spiritual experience of the death in the individual soul of its accidental part and the putting on of incorruption. [...] Now by our definition of a 'true metaphor', there should be some older, undivided 'meaning' from which all these logically disconnected, but poetically connected ideas have sprung. And in the beautiful myth of Demeter and Persephone we find precisely such a meaning. In the myth of Demeter the ideas of waking and sleeping, of summer and winter, of life and death, of mortality and immortality are all lost in one pervasive meaning. This is why so many theories are brought forward to account for the myths. The naturalist is right when he connects the myth with the phenomena of nature, but wrong if he deduces it solely from these. The psycho-analyst is right when he connects the myth with 'inner' (as we now call them) experiences, but wrong if he deduces it solely from these. Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities. As such the poet strives, by his own efforts, to see them, and to make others see them, again<sup>40</sup>.

The formula «mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning» proves to be indispensable in Barfield's theoretical construction: humanity crystallized in myths its own perceptions of a world of which it felt to be

34 See Clark 2015 and Newen *et al.* 2018. Moreover, scholars of Homeric poems – In which «the gods are never far below the surface of [...] language – hence its unearthly sublimity» (Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 86) – have noticed how the inclination of the archaic Greeks to think of a mind extended beyond the body. Cf. Snell 1946; Gill 1998, 2006; Malafouris 2008; Cometa 2017, p. 68 f.

35 Cf. Coward, Gamble 2010, p. 48 f.: «Particular 'things' have properties that structure their perception; textures, surfaces, edges, reflective properties, chemical compositions, etc. and this materiality of the tangible, visible, audible, olfactory and gustatory world is fundamental to the creation of metaphorical associations by resisting some interpretations and metaphors and inviting others».

36 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 73.

37 Müller 1864 [2013], p. 358.

38 Müller 1856, p. 6 ff.

39 Müller 1867, p. 243.

40 Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 84 f.

an integral part; a world that included in its unity elements that today we would define both natural and supernatural. Also, in this case Barfield is somehow in line with nowadays Cognitive Science, which justifies the idea of pre-narrative forms even prior to language itself. In fact, if there is no doubt that the emergence of language has given an unprecedented impetus to the invention of stories<sup>41</sup>, several scholars stressed the importance of narrativity to such an extent as to subvert what would appear to be the natural order of its relationship with language: «The linguistic mind is a consequence and subcategory of the literary mind»<sup>42</sup>.

According to Barfield, therefore, primeval language did not distinguish between concrete and abstract, between “literal” and “metaphorical” sense: «All diction was literal, giving direct voice to the perception of phenomena and humanity’s intuitive mythic participation in them»<sup>43</sup>. However, the natural development of humanity’s consciousness entailed, over time, *a fragmentation of the perception of the world* which, in turn, had a direct impact on language: the original semantic unity was shattered into a multiplicity of separate concepts, with a clear distinction between the literal sense and the metaphorical sense. In this very long process, Barfield identifies two opposing principles: the first is the λογίζεῖν, the intellect that separates unitary meanings into discrete, isolated concepts – and which evidently, in a diachronic sense, has become predominant<sup>44</sup>; the second is the ποιεῖν, the “principle of living unity”:

[this principle] observes the resemblances between things, whereas the first principle marks the differences, is interested in knowing what things *are*, whereas the first discerns what they are not. Accordingly, at a later stage in the evolution of consciousness, we find it operative in individual poets, enabling them (τὸ ποιεῖν) to intuit relationships which their fellows have forgotten – relationships which they must *now* express as metaphor. Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can *now* only be reached by an effort of the individual mind – this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor; and every metaphor is ‘true’ only in so far as it contains such a reality, or hints at it<sup>45</sup>.

Therefore, in ancient times, the relation between λόγος and μῦθος was not in terms of opposition but correlation<sup>46</sup>. This relation, in a certain sense, resembles that identified by Richard Schechner in the dyad efficacy/entertainment, which outlines the *continuum* of performance from ritual (in which maximum effectiveness is given) to representation (in which maximum entertainment is given):

If the performance’s purpose is to effect change, then [...] the performance is a ritual. But if the performance’s purpose is mostly to give pleasure, to show off, to be beautiful, or to pass the time, then the performance is an entertainment<sup>47</sup>.

The ancient worldview developed what Schechner calls the *ur-performance*, that constitutes a primeval, essential, and immediate relationship in a double direction: *horizontal* (between man and what surrounds him) and *vertical* (between man and what transcends him). This *ur-performance*, driven by the need for a sense of presence that is typical of the ritual, also

41 Cf. Cometa 2017, p. 25.

42 Turner 1996, p. 141.

43 Flieger 2002, p. 38.

44 Cf. Barfield 1928 [2010], p. 88: «Thus the old, instinctive consciousness of single meanings, which comes down to us as the Greek myths, is already fighting for its life by Plato’s time as the doctrine of Platonic Ideas (not ‘abstract’, though this word is often erroneously used in English translations); Aristotle’s logic and his Categories, as interpreted by his followers, then tend to concentrate attention exclusively on the *abstract* universals, and so to destroy the balance; and then again the forms and entelechies of Aristotle are brought to life in the poetry of Dante as the Heavenly Hierarchies; and, yet again, Nominalism, with its legacy of modern empirical philosophy and science, obscures men’s vision of all but the abstract universals».

45 *Ivi*, p. 80.

46 Mentre l’opposizione tende a negare l’esistenza stessa del conflitto, la correlazione non lo esclude: e questo può essere fecondo, come ad esempio nel caso dei “miti filosofici” di Platone, che sono verosimili proprio in quanto costituiscono l’involucro narrativo del λόγος.

47 Schechner 2013, p. 80.

contains the horizontal concern of representation that will increasingly characterize the theatre – on whose ritual origin one can discuss but not doubt –: from *doing* to *showing doing*, to use Schechner's formula. Schechner cautiously admits that no *ur-performance* can ever be accurately identified<sup>48</sup>, but what we find most interesting about its theoretical proposal is that it outlines a primeval, albeit unattainable, vision of the world that made no distinctions between the representative and ritual aspects. Although the dyad would have fragmented over time to form two separate domains<sup>49</sup>, still today, as Schechner himself notes, «no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment»<sup>50</sup>. Applying Schechner's paradigm to Barfield's theory, we could say that the *ποιεῖν* saw the unity of rite and representation where the *λογίζεσθαι* has increasingly separated them. But the *ποιεῖν* still remains virtually accessible to individual poets of all times who, in creating metaphors, partially recover the radically primitive instance of language.

Barfield's theory may appear outdated, even naive in its idealism. Yet it provides food for thought that proves to be precious, especially when combined with contemporary formulations with which they manifest interesting coplanarity. This is the case of the Theory of Thought Styles formulated over the last twenty years by Giovanni Bottioli. He identifies in man – intended as a “divided being”, “non-coincident with himself” – a thought and a language that are also divided:

Cosa significa *linguaggio diviso*? Anzitutto, che anche nel linguaggio si svolge un conflitto permanente, e che si può descriverlo come la lotta tra il principio grammaticale (zerostilistico),

che tende a risolvere il conflitto in favore della rigidità, e il principio stilistico, che tende a mostrare l'esistenza di tensioni agonistiche, e la loro fecondità<sup>51</sup>.

The most external form of conflict in language consists in the fact that, on the one hand, it is flexible enough to make possible semantic torsions and intensifications which, on the other hand, its structure aims to censor: grammar, in fact, *tends to hide the divisions of language like Ego tends to veil the divisions of the subject*<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, an exclusively grammatical point of view would intend language as an undivided phenomenon, strictly regulated and unrelated to conflict. But this conception is simply the result of a separative logical-linguistic system (something similar to the *λογίζεσθαι* of which Barfield speaks), governed by the common rule of inference and, therefore, by the principles of coincidence and non-contradiction ( $A = A$  and  $\neq non-A$ ):

*Separativo* non vuol dire che non esiste la possibilità di legami, e di inferenze, ma che questi legami sono univoci. L'univocità è la rigidità semantica. Nell'ambito del separativo, dunque, incontriamo articolazioni rigide, come quelle che presiedono ai paradigmi in linguistica, dove i termini si presuppongono reciprocamente: si tratta però di *presupposizioni differenziali*, non di *presupposizioni reciproche* tra opposti<sup>53</sup>.

On the other hand, the possibility emerges of a system which is *non-separative* (as it is not oriented towards conciliation and synthesis) and *conjunctive* (because it is based on a strong interdependence between its elements). A non-aporetic yet “paradoxical” system, in which  $A = A$  but can also be  $= non-A$ ; and in which, of course, *the paradox is not the irruption of the illogical, but the mode of operation*<sup>54</sup>. The

48 But Schechner profitably contradicts himself and frames the efficacy-entertainment dyad assigning, in a stratification of results, the first destination to the ritual and the second to the performing arts. Cf. Tomasello, Vescovo 2021, p. 57

49 Cf. Tomasello, Vescovo 2021, pp. 53-59.

50 Schechner 2013, p. 80.

51 Bottioli 2013, p. 198.

52 Cf. *Ivi*, p. 140

53 *Ivi*, p. 166.

54 Cf. *Ivi*, p. 154 f. See *Ivi*, p. 182: «Una logica della flessibilità guarda alle relazioni agonistiche, non soltanto a quelle più aspramente conflittuali e distruttive, ma anche al nobile conflitto che genera, per esempio, le opere d'arte. Tutti i fenomeni caratterizzati dalla *divisione*, intesa come scissione congiuntiva, presentano lo statuto ontologico della flessibilità».

fundamental point is that the principle of non-contradiction is always *implicitly modalized*, and every type of oppositional relationship interprets it differently<sup>55</sup>. On the one hand, therefore, separative thought disqualifies the relationship between identity and non-identity in terms of mutual exclusion; on the other hand, the subjunctive thought makes it fruitful in terms of a reciprocal implication, of co-belonging: put in these terms, *identity is then intended as identification*, as “to tend towards something else”.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, when Gandalf introduces himself to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli after returning from the death, he states: «Indeed I am Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been»<sup>56</sup>. He is not claiming to have become like Saruman or to have taken his place, but rather to be – *to have identified with* – Saruman «as he should have been». What for a separative logic is an aporia ( $A \neq B$ ) – to be defused, if anything, by relegating it to the domain of figurative speech –, for a conjunctive logic is a *possibility*: Gandalf’s identity is not rigid but flexible, non-coincident with itself, open to identification: precisely for this reason, he can present himself in this way completely out of metaphor.

Although Bottiroli resolutely refuses to analyse the “problem of the origins”, he nevertheless asserts that it, from the point of view of a plural logic, becomes the problem of the *mode*<sup>57</sup>. The Theory of the Styles of Thought, therefore, can offer a good service as a sort of “diachronic filter” of that of ancient semantic unity. It can be thought that, in its beginnings, language articulated the density of the world through a logic that, rather than separating the objects of the world, tended instead to establish conjunctive relationships – even conflictual, yet because of this fruitful –. A conjunctive language, therefore, which did not separate concrete and abstract meanings, the

spirit from the breath, the light from the gods. Subsequently, the progressive stiffening of human thought within the logical-separative principle meant that this principle was imposed on language, with the results we have outlined above.

Thus, the more the separative thought prevailed, the more the manifestations of flexibility have been confined to the “languages of art”<sup>58</sup>, among which we must certainly include poetry and myth. Müller’s disqualification of myth as a “disease of language” shows itself, in the final analysis, as an expression of the separative λογίζειν which relegates the conjunctive ποιεῖν to the closed, reassuring domain of style and projects itself unduly onto the past.

Therefore, a merely expressive conception is insufficient because it tends to identify style as a “language of the exception” that produces bizarre and, in the limit, deviant sentences – as poetry normally is intended to do. Instead, it is more essentially a language that goes beyond itself, whose utterances are expressions of a non-separative thought and not mere rhetorical trappings. The most suggestive rhetorical figures – first and foremost the metaphor – are in fact conjunctive figures: in figural language we encounter metamorphoses of identity that recall the processes of identification<sup>59</sup>. From this point of view, Barfield’s idea that poets recover, through metaphor, the ancient unity of language, finds much more than confirmation in Bottiroli’s theory.

At this point, it is necessary to move our analysis from Barfield to Tolkien, who offered two essential contributions precisely on the relationship between myth and language.

55 Cf. *Ivi*, p. 161.

56 *LotR*, p. 495.

57 Bottiroli 2013, p. 150.

58 *Ivi*, p. 197.

59 Cf. Bottiroli 2007.

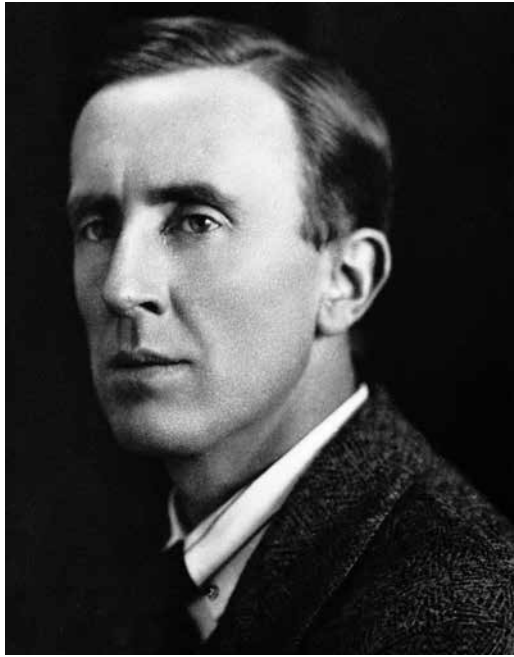


FIG. 3. J.R.R. TOLKIEN

## 2 – «THE REFRACTED LIGHT [...] SPLINTERED FROM A SINGLE WHITE»: MYTH AND LANGUAGE IN TOLKIEN

A first echo of Barfield's theories can be felt in the poem *Mythopoeia* ("The Making of Myths")<sup>60</sup>, written by Tolkien after a conversation with Hugo Dyson and C.S. Lewis at the Magdalene College (Oxford) on 19 September 1931.

Lewis – who at that time was still perched on positivist positions<sup>61</sup> – argued that myths were «lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver», while Dyson and Tolkien countered that they could preserve truths beyond the understanding of the intellect:

You look at trees, he said, and call them 'trees', and probably you do not think twice about the word. You call a star a 'star', and think nothing more of it. But you must remember that these words, 'tree', 'star', were (in their original forms) names given to these objects by people with very different views from yours. To you, a tree is simply a vegetable organism, and a star simply a ball of inanimate matter moving along a mathematical course. But the first men to talk of 'trees' and 'stars' saw things very differently. To them, the world was alive with mythological beings. They saw

the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music. They saw the sky as a jewelled tent, and the earth as the womb whence all living things have come. To them, the whole of creation was 'myth-woven and elf-patterned. [...] But, replied Tolkien, man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals. Lewis agreed: he had, indeed, accepted something like this notion for many years. Therefore, Tolkien continued, not merely the abstract thoughts of man but also his imaginative inventions must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth, in practising 'mythopoeia' and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a storyteller, or 'sub-creator' as Tolkien liked to call such a person, is actually fulfilling God's purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light.<sup>62</sup>

In *Mythopoeia*, in fact, Tolkien targets Lewis' positions:

You look at trees and label them just so,  
(for trees are 'trees' and growing is 'to grow');  
you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace  
one of the many minor globes of Space:  
a star's a star, some matter in a ball  
compelled to courses mathematical  
amid the regimented, cold, Inane,  
where destined atoms are each moment slain  
(vv. 1-8).

As is evident, the object of Tolkien's criticism is the modern worldview springing from a separative thought that splits objects and phenomena from each other and, above all, from man. In this view, as noted by Medcalf, it is «as if God created a set of simple and separate – but easily generalisable – entities distinguished by clear and distinct attributes»<sup>63</sup>. Therefore, Tolkien lists, not without irony, a series of tautologies typical of the worldview he criticizes:

the petreous rocks, the arboreal trees,  
tellurian earth, and stellar stars, and these  
homuncular men (vv. 19-21).

Separative thought examines things and phenomena with a cold rationality,

60 In TL, pp. 60-66.

61 Carpenter 1978 [2006], p. 43.

62 *Ivi*, p. 43.

63 Medcalf 1999, p. 36.

considering as isolated objects to be evaluated only on the basis of their properties, and aiming at a knowledge that implies to possess and dominate its objects. Like Saruman, modern man «has a mind of metal and wheels» that prefers to «[break] a thing to find out what it is»<sup>64</sup> than understand it in its uniqueness and complexity. The tautological use of the adjective, moreover, shows all Tolkien's irony: in fact, he considered the adjective as a "spell" capable of changing the meaning of words, creating wonder or horror:

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*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent. And that is not surprising: such incantations might indeed be said to be only another view of adjectives, a part of speech in a mythical grammar<sup>65</sup>.

In the verses of *Mythopoeia*, however, the adjectives do nothing but replicate the nouns, creating a vicious circle in the meaning. As Barfield had already theorized, Tolkien writes that man is condemned not to be able to know Creation unless he creatively participates in it through poetry and myth:

Yet trees and not 'trees', until so named and seen –  
and never were so named, till those had been  
who speech's involuted breath unfurled,  
faint echo and dim picture of the world,  
[...]  
He sees no stars who does not see them first  
of living silver made that sudden burst  
to flame like flowers beneath the ancient song,

whose very echo after-music long  
has since pursued. There is no firmament,  
only a void, unless a jewelled tent  
myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth,  
unless the mother's womb whence all have  
birth (vv. 31-34, 45-52).

Thus, the role towards the world that man assumed in ancient times – and which can and should assume also today – emerges. As Medcalf notes in this regard:

In this understanding of what it is to be human, Tolkien's thought is both Barfieldian and, like Barfield's, Coleridgean. All objects, says Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, as objects are essentially dull and dead, and only achieve full existence because there is an echo, in human consciousness, of the creativity of God, Who sees and creates in one act<sup>66</sup>.

Tolkien's view is certainly close to Barfield's but, in some ways, is even more radical. While Barfield recognizes poetry as the ability to create metaphors and meaning and, therefore, recover part of the by now unattainable ancient semantic unity, Tolkien, although admitting that language and man himself have fallen with respect to primitive unity, affirms that every true artistic creation is a "sub-creation", an act that imitates the Creation of God and collaborates with it<sup>67</sup>. Therefore, according to Barfield, *the creative act looks back towards a radically primitive instance*; according to Tolkien, *it participates in the eternal present of Creation*. As Flieger states, in fact, «words were for Tolkien not simply a window on the past» – this may well hold true for Barfield – «but the key to that lost relationship between humanity and God of which a sense of the Fall is the only memory»<sup>68</sup>.

64 LotR, p. 473, 259.

65 FS, p. 122.

66 Medcalf 1999, p. 37. See Coleridge 1817 [1983], p. 304: «The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead».

67 It goes without saying that if "sub-creation" collaborates with the Creation, the poet collaborates with God. Not for chance, Tolkien often speaks of his artistic creation as a "reporting" and "recording" rather than "inventing". As stated by Flieger 2002, p. 173, «Tolkien knew himself to be a poet, and had considerable confidence in and respect for his own abilities and his elvish craft; but he also knew beyond any doubt that he was the prism, not the light».

68 Flieger 2002, p. 8.

From this point of view, man, however fallen from Grace, has not lost the *power* and the *right* – maybe the *duty* even? – to create:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,  
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
Disgraced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
and keeps the rags of lordship one he owned,  
his world-dominion by creative act:  
not his to worship the great Artefact,  
man, sub-creator, the refracted light  
through whom is splintered from a single White  
to many hues, and endlessly combined  
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.  
Though all the crannies of the world we filled  
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build  
gods and their houses out of dark and light,  
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right  
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.  
We make still by the law in which we're made  
(vv. 46-72).

Flieger offers a valuable reflection on the last verse, in particular:

Tolkien emphasizes the *right* to sub-create — not just to make, but to make by “the law in which we're made.” The preposition is important; we are not made *by* a law but *in* that law. We are part of it not just products of it. That law is the word, the Logos, the highest expression of Barfield's ancient semantic unity, the whole vision shattered as we have fallen and as our perceptions have fragmented<sup>69</sup>.

Tolkien's theorization is specified in two important essays. The first, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*<sup>70</sup>, targets the modern scholars who question *Beowulf* as a precious historical-philological testimony but reject its reveries, monsters and obscurities. In this attitude Tolkien repents and accuses the same logomorphic fallacy already theorized by Barfield:

When we have read [*Beowulf*], as a poem, rather than as a collection of episodes, we perceive that he who wrote *hæleð under heofenum* may have meant in dictionary terms ‘heroes under heaven’, or ‘mighty men upon earth’, but he and

his hearers were thinking of the *eormengrund*, the great earth, ringed with *garsecgy* the shoreless sea, beneath the sky's inaccessible roof; whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat<sup>71</sup>.

The fundamental problem is that *Beowulf* «has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art»<sup>72</sup>. Only being read as the work of art that it is, the poem lets the reader enter, through an «intuitive sympathy»<sup>73</sup>, into its dark and wonderful atmosphere. Tolkien's attitude is not naïve, quite the opposite: it is a precise indication of a method that urges us to use the tools of philology in order to avoid any undue logomorphic projection of the present on the past. From this point of view, keeping in mind that for the author and the original user of *Beowulf* the world was an *eormengrund* means fully understanding the meanings of the work. All these considerations are offered by Tolkien through a precious allegory:

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stones some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. [...] And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.’ But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea<sup>74</sup>.

69 *Ivi*, p. 43.

70 It was originally the text of a lecture given by Tolkien to the British Academy on November 25, 1936 in memory of Sir Israel Gollancz. As noted by Flieger 2002, p. 13, this essay «stands as the most important and influential piece of work on that poem in the twentieth century».

71 BMC, p. 18.

72 *Ivi*, p. 5.

73 Flieger 2002, p. 14.

74 BMC, p. 7-8.

The allegory is not difficult to understand: the old stones represent the Anglo-Saxon in which *Beowulf* is composed, a language still «myth-woven»; the ancient residence represents the heritage of the myth and the tower the poem itself, a monumental work from which it is possible «to look out upon the sea»<sup>75</sup>. The dismantling of the tower is none other than the erudite work of modern philologists who do not know – nor want – to penetrate the atmosphere and spirit of *Beowulf*. They reject its radical otherness and profound continuity with the present world but break it down and dissect it like a dead body to arrive at some external argument, condemning themselves not to grasp its final meaning: «the fate of human life and efforts»<sup>76</sup>.

The essay *On Fairy-stories*<sup>77</sup> – which constitutes, in many ways, the reverse of the one on *Beowulf* – starts from Max Müller’s and Andrew Lang’s theories on myth and folklore. Indeed, Lang himself had criticized Müller<sup>78</sup> but «although he often disagreed with [his] conclusions, he was not against his methods»<sup>79</sup>. Moreover, just as Müller’s mythological theory traced the origin of myths (and therefore of fairy-stories, intended as “degraded myths”) to the etymological “roots”, Lang’s anthropological method related it to ancient “wild” rituals that could be related to the practices of contemporary “primitive” cultures.

Tolkien proves to be as distant from Müller as from Lang. His approach – although certainly based on Comparative Philology – is eminently aesthetic and literary: here too the metaphor of the mine

returns, which alludes to folklorists and anthropologist’s intent to use stories «not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information, about matters in which they are interested»<sup>80</sup>. According to Tolkien myth and fairy-tales are worthy of attention for the stories they convey. Therefore, it is good to investigate, rather than their *origin*, their *effect*. On the other hand, Tolkien states that «to ask what is the origin of stories (however qualified) is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind»<sup>81</sup>. It is one of Tolkien’s longest standing beliefs, as he himself states in a letter:

It was just as the 1914 War burst on me that I made the discovery that ‘legends’ depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the ‘legends’ which it conveys by tradition<sup>82</sup>.

The relationship between mind, language, and stories is presented by the author as simultaneous and recursive: «the incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval»<sup>83</sup>. The mention of the incarnate mind may interest scholars of Cognitive Science, as well as the fact that Tolkien seems to regard language «as being rooted in, and inseparable from, the natural environment in which it develops»<sup>84</sup>. It can therefore be said that *language reflects and determines the perceptions, the world vision, and the cognitive scope of its community*. To explain the relations between environment, perception, language and myth, Tolkien proposes the allegory of the “Cauldron of Story”:

75 On this final image, see Flieger 2002, p. 16.

76 BMC, p. 33.

77 This essay too was born as the text of a lecture given by Tolkien at the University of St. Andrews on March 8, 1939 in memory of Andrew Lang.

78 Cf. Lang 1884.

79 Flieger 2005, p. 22.

80 FS, p. 119.

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Letters*, n. 180. Tolkien here add: «And *vice versa*. Volapük, Esperanto, Ido, Novial, etc. etc. are dead, far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends». Cf. SV, p. 211: «To give your language an individual flavour, it must have woven into it the threads of an individual mythology, individual while working within the scheme of natural human mythopoeia as your word-form may be individual while working within the hackneyed limits of human, even European, phonetics. The converse indeed is true, your language construction will *breed* a mythology».

83 FS, p. 122.

84 Cf. Smith 2007, p. 71. The author notes the similarity between Tolkien’s ideas and those of the American linguists Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir. Cf. Whorf 1956; Sapir 1921, 1983.

History, folktale, legend, and myth are all thrown into the Pot at one time or another, and all contribute to the flavor of the Soup. What is ladled out in any given instance is a single serving, a *story*. It is the story as we have it to which we respond, not to the raw ingredients<sup>85</sup>.

Through this allegory a profoundly performative vision emerges which, on the one hand, points to a traditional heritage of “ingredients” thrown into the “Cauldron” at different times and which, with all evidence, do not remain “raw” but change during the “cooking” and contribute all together to give the “Soup” its characteristic flavour; and, on the other hand, it establishes the active role of the author who, starting from his “ingredients”, has a considerable measure of intervention on them. Indeed, Tolkien is extremely aware of the dynamic between *traditio*, *intentio* and *inventio*<sup>86</sup>.

Tradition, therefore, is not intended as a passive, static “archive” from which to draw<sup>87</sup>; on the contrary, it is always *in actu*, it is a living and vital form of stable but ever-changing images. We find no better formula to describe this ongoing process than Francesco Benozzo’s words: «la tradizione si tradiziona»<sup>88</sup>.

Tolkien, moreover, is also sensitive to the more strictly performative aspects, linked to oral tradition and the evolution of stories over time:

If we pause, not merely to note that such old elements have been preserved, but to think *how* they have been preserved, we must conclude, I think, that it has happened, often if not always, precisely because of this literary effect. It cannot have been we, or even the brothers Grimm, that first felt it. Fairy-stories are by no means rocky matrices out of which the fossils cannot be prised except by an expert geologist. The ancient elements can be knocked out, or forgotten and dropped out, or replaced by other ingredients with the greatest ease: as any comparison of a story with closely related variants will show. The things that are there must often have been retained (or inserted) because the oral narrators, instinctively or consciously, felt their literary ‘significance’.

A story invented to explain a ritual (a process that is sometimes supposed to have frequently occurred) remains primarily a story. It takes form as such, and will survive (long after the ritual evidently) only because of its story-values. In some cases details that now are notable merely because they are strange may have once been so everyday and unregarded that they were slipped in casually: like mentioning that a man ‘raised his hat’, or ‘caught a train’. But such casual details will not long survive change in everyday habits. Not in a period of oral transmission. In a period of writing (and of rapid changes in habits) a story may remain unchanged long enough for even its casual details to acquire the value of quaintness or queerness. Much of Dickens now has this air. [...] The anthropologists and folklorists do not imagine any conditions of that kind. But if they are dealing with unlettered oral transmission, then they should all the more reflect that in that case they are dealing with items whose primary object was story-building, and whose primary reason for survival was the same<sup>89</sup>.

Barfield’s influence is felt here too. Tolkien clearly sees language and myth in a recursive relationship: like Barfield and Cassirer, he believes that, in the primitive state of human consciousness, perception, language and myth were united and that, following the fragmentation of perceptions and the division between *λόγος* and *μῦθος*, even the objects of thought were divided into different meanings (mythical and religious, linguistic and symbolic, scientific, logical and phenomenal).

Tolkien, Cassirer and Barfield also coincide in their view that the fundamental concept of metaphor is also present in this primeval awakening of consciousness. Language develops through a largely metaphorical process of semantic fragmentation while myth, for its part, is fundamentally symbolic in character, providing human communities with a metaphor for both the natural world and their own behaviour. The *mythos* therefore provides a natural source for the development and enrichment of the *logos*. Myth provides a base from which language can evolve<sup>90</sup>.

For this reason, Tolkien can only reject Müller’s theory:

85 Flieger 2002, p. 23.

86 On this dynamic, see Tomasello 2021, *passim*.

87 As stated by Benozzo 2010, p. 50: «Da questa idea di fondo è facile procedere per smembramenti e parcellizzazioni, suddividendo arbitrariamente la tradizione in parti di comodo poste tra loro in rapporti di opposizione o correlazione: tradizione “orale”, “colta”, “popolare”, “volgare” etc.».

88 Benozzo 2010: 57 f.; See Id. 2007, pp. 201-204.

89 FS, p. 129, 158.

90 Smith 2007, p. 128.

Max Müller's view of mythology as a 'disease of language' can be abandoned without regret. Mythology is not a disease at all, though it may like all human things become diseased. You might as well say that thinking is a disease of the mind. It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology. But Language cannot, all the same, be dismissed<sup>91</sup>.

Yet, in *On Fairy-stories* Tolkien does not pedantically follow Barfield. On the one hand, he goes back to his source, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*; on the other hand, he specifies his theory of "sub-creation" in the light of the writings of G.K. Chesterton. In fact, in his essay Tolkien quotes *Charles Dickens: a Critical Study* (1906)<sup>92</sup> and certainly draws inspiration from the preface written by Maisie Ward for *The Coloured Lands* (1938), in which the idea is expressed that «in storytelling we co-operate with God in the enrichment of creation»<sup>93</sup>. Hence, the reconstruction of the origin of the Norse god Thórr that he proposes in the essay «is not, as it would be in Barfieldian use, part of an argument against the logomorphic assumption that myths begin as attempted rational explanations of natural phenomena, which were experienced in the detached form a modern positivist might describe»<sup>94</sup>. Rather, Tolkien here argues with the idea that myths are a survival of ancient allegories of nature – an idea that Barfield himself partially accepts – and that fairy-stories are a degraded version of the myths themselves. All stories have in common that they are the result of a "sub-creation": therefore, Thórr comes neither from mythicized natural phenomena nor from deified historical characters:

His name is Thunder, of which Thórr is the Norse form; and it is not difficult to interpret

his hammer, Miöllnir, as lightning. Yet Thórr has (as far as our late records go) a very marked character, or personality, which cannot be found in thunder or in lightning, even though some details can, as it were, be related to these natural phenomena: for instance, his red beard, his loud voice and violent temper, his blundering and smashing strength. None the less it is asking a question without much meaning, if we inquire: Which came first, nature-allegories about personalized thunder in the mountains, splitting rocks and trees; or stories about an irascible, not very clever, red-beard farmer, of a strength beyond common measure, a person (in all but mere stature) very like the Northern farmers, the *bændr* by whom Thórr was chiefly beloved? To a picture of such a man Thórr may be held to have 'dwindled', or from it the god may be held to have been enlarged. But I doubt whether either view is right – not by itself, not if you insist that one of these things must precede the other. It is more reasonable to suppose that the farmer popped up in the very moment when Thunder got a voice and face; that there was a distant growl of thunder in the hills every time a story-teller heard a farmer in a rage<sup>95</sup>.

The distance that now separates Tolkien from Barfield is clear: for Tolkien there has been no evolution of consciousness, in the sense that between *Mythopoeia* and *On Fairy-stories* his conception of consciousness itself has changed and he «has ceased to hold Barfield's doctrine that objects are partly constituted by our awareness of them»<sup>96</sup>. The creative power of man does not directly affect what Tolkien calls the Primary World (i.e., the Creation), which is entirely an act of God. Rather, the essentially demiurgic act of "sub-creation"<sup>97</sup> puts into existence Secondary Worlds «composed of the mental power of image making, imagination proper, and the art of so expressing and deploying images as to induce Secondary Belief»<sup>98</sup>. It follows, first, that, myths and fairy-stories, as the result of "sub-crea-

91 FS, p. 121 f.

92 See *Ivi*, p. 146 f.

93 Edwards 2014, p. 208. As noted by Medcalf 1999, p. 42, strangely Tolkien does not mention *Orthodoxy*, in whose chapter *The Ethics of Elfland* Chesterton writes that fairy-stories exist to «echo an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement. These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green» (Chesterton 1909 [1986], p. 257).

94 Medcalf 1999, p. 42.

95 FS, p. 123 f.

96 Medcalf 1999, p. 42.

97 Cf. Flieger 2002, p. 55.

98 Medcalf 1999, p. 43.

tion”, contain elements of truth: not only they «are largely made of ‘truth’» but they even convey aspects of it «that can only be received in this mode»<sup>99</sup>. But that’s not all: the stories have an impact on the Primary World because their purpose is *recovery*, the «regaining of a clear view» which doesn’t imply «seeing things as they are» but «seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ – as things apart from ourselves»<sup>100</sup>. By «things apart from ourselves» Tolkien means that they exist – as they are created by God – regardless of human consciousness. In Bottiroli’s terms, this statement is not rigidly separative; things are «apart» but man establishes a conjunctive relation with them: discovering them in their otherness and investing them with myths and fairy-stories, man participates in them and, in doing so, knows himself better, surpasses himself. It follows that:

The Secondary World can and should redirect our attention to the Primary World and through that World to its Maker. It should enable us to regain, to recollect what we have always known but have forgotten how to see. Through imitation of God, man has the opportunity to recover His works<sup>101</sup>.

In this way, something similar to the recovery of the semantic unit of Barfield happens, «but it is not importantly a felt change of consciousness to a more archaic state, rather a recovery of the true “potency of the words and the wonder of the things”»<sup>102</sup>.

To what has been said so far, it must be added that Tolkien’s reflection on language does not focus, as for Barfield, only on the search for ancient semantic unity, but also on *an original correspondence between sound and the meaning of words*. In fact, as a philologist he declares himself especially interested «in linguistic aesthetics» and «in the aesthetic rather than the functional aspects of language»<sup>103</sup>. Therefore, from his point of view, language as a natural product of humanity should be investigated more as *expression* than as *communication*:

The communication factor has been very powerful in directing the development of language; but the more individual and personal factor – pleasure in articulate sound, and in the symbolic use of it, independent of communication though constantly in fact entangled with it – must not be forgotten for a moment<sup>104</sup>.

Tolkien’s specific interest is «in word-form in itself, and in word-form in relation to meaning (so-called phonetic fitness)»<sup>105</sup>. He argues, in particular, that «it is the *contemplation* of the relation between sound and notion which is the main source of pleasure»<sup>106</sup>. In other words, «the pleasing emotion that can be provoked by language is largely caused by the fitness of its phonetics to its meaning»<sup>107</sup>. Therefore, Tolkien hypothesizes that at the basis of language there is first and foremost an ancient pleasure – purely expressive and performative – of articulating sounds as pleasant as conformed to the objects they designate (“phonetic fitness”). He seems

99 *Letters*, n. 131. Cf. *Ivi*, n. 181: «I think that fairy story has its own mode of reflecting truth, different from allegory, or (sustained) satire, or “realism”, and in some ways more powerful. But first of all it must succeed just as a tale, excite, please and even on occasion move, and in its own imagined world be accorded (literary) belief. To succeed in that was my primary object». As the result of a “sub-creation”, therefore, Thórr *really exists*, of course, within a Secondary World, that of myth, which is clearly distinct both from the Primary World and from philosophy and, in some way, also from religion. Cf. Medcalf 1999, p. 43: «To accord more than secondary belief to Thórr, to confuse primary and secondary worlds by worshipping the god you have imagined, is morbid delusion».

100 FS, p. 146.

101 Flieger 2002, p. 25. Cf. FS, p. 146: «We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses — and wolves».

102 Medcalf, p. 44.

103 *Letters*, n. 131, 180.

104 SV, p. 208.

105 *Ivi*, p. 211.

106 *Ivi*, p. 206.

107 Smith 2007, p. 57.

to have in mind a primitive degree of language, strongly linked to the natural environment that generates it<sup>108</sup>, which translates the perceptions that man has of that environment into articulated sounds capable of generating aesthetic pleasure in speakers and listeners<sup>109</sup>. This “phonetic fitness” can be grasped not only at the level of individual words but also at the level of an entire language:

The basic pleasure in the phonetic elements of a language and in the style of their patterns, and then in a higher dimension, pleasure in the association of these word-forms with meanings, is of fundamental importance. This pleasure is quite distinct from the practical knowledge of a language, and not the same as an analytic understanding of its structure. It is simpler, deeper rooted, and yet more immediate than the enjoyment of literature. Though it may be allied to some of the elements in the appreciation of verse, it does not need any poets, other than the nameless artists who composed the language.

[Of] course, the pleasure is not solely concerned with any word, any ‘sound-pattern + meaning’, by itself, but with its fitness also to a whole style<sup>110</sup>.

For Tolkien, in short, «language without sound-symbolism would have been a lifeless thing»<sup>111</sup>, exactly as it would have been if devoid of a mythology. Thus, a recursive unity of sound, meaning and mythology is outlined which clearly brings us back to Tolkien’s conclusions on the origin of Thórr.

Tolkien admits that «the nature of this pleasure is difficult, perhaps impossible, to analyse. It cannot, of course, be discov-

ered by structural analysis»<sup>112</sup>; at the most, it can be examined through practical examples and presuppositions on the “linguistic taste” of speakers, with all the evident limitations that this entails. It is for this reason that Tolkien never expressed at an academic level a complete theory on linguistic aesthetics and phonosemantics – topics which, on the other hand, were also intimately linked to his passion for the invention of languages – fearing not to be taken seriously and even to cause derision. Not that he moved alone in this field: Wilhelm Von Humboldt had written at length on the symbolism of sounds, and also Otto Jespersens, Roman Jakobson and Edward Sapir proposed theories somehow similar to those of Tolkien. Nevertheless, the modern linguistic theory of Saussure and, later, of Chomsky, firmly denied any correspondence of sound and meaning<sup>113</sup>.

If Tolkien never expressed a scientific theory, his interests and beliefs about the correspondence of sound and meaning found precise expression in the creation of the languages of Middle-earth.

### 3 – «AND THEY WALKED THE EARTH IN WONDER»: LINGUISTICS AND AESTHETICS IN TOLKIEN’S LEGENDARIUM

Our last question concerns the ways in which the theories on aesthetics, language, and myths find their expression in Tolkien’s fiction. It should be borne in mind, in this regard, that in an author of his genre the scientific study of language cannot be separated from literary creation,

108 Cf. Abram 1996, p. 140: «If we listen, first, to the sounds of an oral language – to the rhythms, tones, and inflections that play through the speech of an oral culture – we will likely find that these elements are attuned, in multiple and subtle ways, to the contour and scale of the local landscape, to the depth of its valleys or the open stretch of its distances, to the visual rhythms of the local topography».

109 These ideas find direct representation in some passages from *The Lord of the Rings*. When the Fellowship arrives in Lohtlórien, «Gimli halted and stooped to the ground. “I hear nothing but the night-speech of plant and stone”, he said» (LotR, p. 337). The words of Gimli are not to be considered figurative: for him plants and stones do not produce “noises” but a real language that is pleasant and meaningful. Later, when Aragorn sings a song in the language of Rohan, Legolas comments: «That, I guess, is the language of the Rohirrim, [...] for it is like to this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains. But I cannot guess what it means, save that it is laden with the sadness of Mortal Men» (LotR, p. 508). In this case there is a direct correspondence between the musicality of the language and the shape of the environment that generated it.

110 EW, p. 190, 192.

111 Smith 2007, p. 58.

112 EW, p. 191.

113 In recent times, phonosemantics has been revived by authors such as Margaret Magnus (1999) and Vilayanur S. Ramachandran in his BBC Reith Lectures for 2003 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2003>). For an account of the history of phonosemantic studies, cf. Magnus 2013.

especially if we consider that the *Legendarium* originates precisely from the creation of a language – that would have become the Elvish Quenya<sup>114</sup> – as a result of which he was more and more «involved in inventing ‘legends’ of the same ‘taste’»<sup>115</sup>. It therefore seems legitimate to ask how Barfield’s theory influenced Tolkien even in the more specifically narrative aspects.

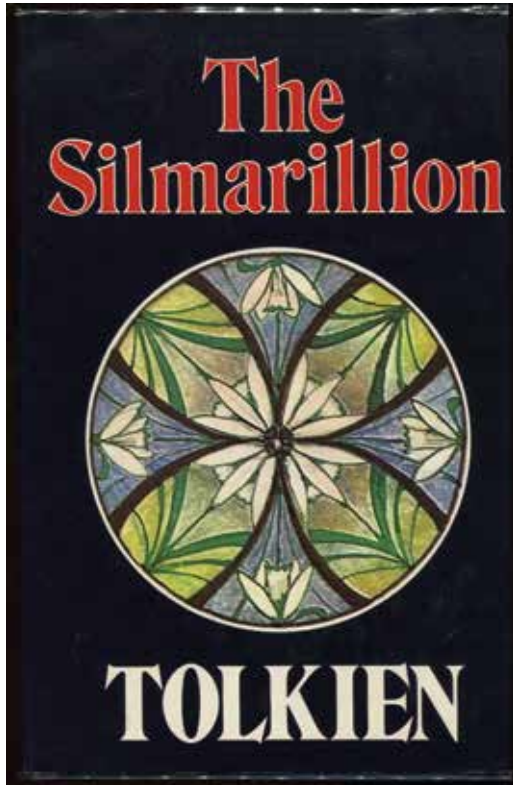


FIG. 4. J.R.R. TOLKIEN, THE SILMARILLION

If Tolkien never developed a scientific theory on phonosemantics and linguistic aesthetics, the creation of his fictional languages responds precisely to his beliefs about these matters. In *A Secret Vice*, in fact, Tolkien speaks of Quenya as «a lan-

guage that has [...] reached a highish level both of beauty in word-form considered abstractly, and of ingenuity in the relations of symbol and sense»<sup>116</sup>.

We close our circle, and go back to the passage from *The Hobbit* with which we opened this essay. It is clear, at this point, that the link with Barfield is twofold: on the one hand, the mention of Bilbo’s “breath” takes up the considerations on “πνεῦμα” and “spiritus” in *Poetic Diction*; on the other hand the reference to «the language learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful» recalls the ancient semantic unity of words.

Why should the language of wonderfulness be spoken by the elves? To answer, we must ask ourselves what the Elves represent for Tolkien. An answer is provided in some of his letters:

Of course in reality my ‘elves’ are only a representation or an apprehension of a part of human nature.

I should say that [Elves] represent really Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life.

Of course, in fact exterior to my story, Elves and Men are just different aspects of the Humane, and represent the problem of Death as seen by a finite but willing and self-conscious person. In this mythological world the Elves and Men are in their incarnate forms kindred, but in the relation of their ‘spirits’ to the world in time represent different ‘experiments,’ each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness. The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men. That is: they have a devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as ‘other’ – sc. as a reality derived from God in the

114 For Tolkien, the primeval motivation for building languages was only a «‘phonaesthetic’ pleasure» (*Letters*, n. 144). As he wrote in *Letters*, n. 297: «It must be emphasized that this process of invention was/is a private enterprise undertaken to give pleasure to myself by giving expression to my personal linguistic ‘aesthetic’ or taste and its fluctuations. It was largely antecedent to the composing of legends and ‘histories’ in which these languages could be ‘realized’; and the bulk of the nomenclature is constructed from these pre-existing languages, and where the resulting names have analysable meanings (as is usual) these are relevant solely to the fiction with which they are integrated». Cf. Solopova 2009; Comastri 2016, 2018.

115 *Letters*, n. 180. Cf. Flieger 2002, p. 61.

116 SV, p. 210. On the creation of individual words we have a testimony of Christopher Tolkien in LR, p. 342: «He did not [...] ‘invent’ new words and names arbitrarily: in principle, he devised from within the historical structure, proceeding from the ‘bases’ or primitive stems, adding suffix or prefix or forming compounds, deciding (or, as he would have said, ‘finding out’) when the word came into the language, following it through the regular changes in form that it would thus have undergone, and observing the possibilities of formal or semantic influence from other words in the course of its history».

same degree as themselves – not as a material for use or as a power-platform. They also possess a ‘subcreational’ or artistic faculty of great excellence<sup>117</sup>.

On a metanarrative level, therefore, the Elves represent a humanity that has not yet been “disgraced”, at the height of its creative and aesthetic power. On a narrative level, on the other hand, Tolkien recreates the linguistic history of our world as theorized in *Poetic Diction* and in his essays on *Beowulf* and the fairy-stories. Therefore, the language appears in Middle-earth relatively late: in fact, the “awakening” of the Elves took place after the creation of Arda and the wars of the Valar against Melkor:

By the starlit mere of Cuiviénen, Water of Awakening, they rose from the sleep of Ilúvatar; and while they dwelt yet silent by Cuiviénen their eyes beheld first of all things the stars of heaven. [...] Long they dwelt in their first home by the water under stars, and they walked the Earth in wonder; and they began to make speech and to give names to all things that they perceived. Themselves they named the Quendi, signifying those that speak with voices; for as yet they had met no other living things that spoke or sang. [...] And Oromë loved the Quendi, and named them in their own tongue Eldar, the people of the stars<sup>118</sup>.

There are many theoretical implications of this passage. First, as Flieger states:

With their coming to consciousness, language begins. With their language, their history begins. In any world this is an event of prime importance; in Tolkien’s world we see it happen. Asleep, the Elves are an unconscious element in the creation they inhabit and of which they are a part. With their awakening (and the word has both a literal and a metaphoric value here) they begin to be aware of and interact with their surroundings. With and through the Elves, Tolkien makes real the interdependence of consciousness, language, and myth<sup>119</sup>.

The image of the Elves that «walked upon the Earth in wonder» strongly recalls the idea of an ancestral world that primeval humanity still perceived full of wonderfulness. The first source of wonder, for the Elves, is the starlit sky: the name *Eldar* is linked to the stars, as can be better understood from the *Silmarillion* appendix on the elvish languages:

*êl, elen*, ‘star’. According to Elvish legend, *ele* was a primitive exclamation ‘behold!’ made by the Elves when they first saw the stars. From this origin derived the ancient words *êl* and *elen*, meaning ‘star’, and the adjectives *elda* and *elena*, meaning ‘of the stars’<sup>120</sup>.

In the essay *Quendi and Eldar*, the variant “*ela!*” is more precisely registered as an «imperative exclamation directing sight to an actually visible object»<sup>121</sup>: a definition focused on a direct perception that seems to refer to the aforementioned concept of Barfield, according to which in the ancient semantic unit «all diction was literal, giving direct voice to the perception of phenomena and humanity’s intuitive mythic participation in them». Hence, the noun *êl, elen*, “star” comes directly from the first word uttered by the Elves, “*ele*”, “behold!”. Not by chance, it is an imperative as in the case of the creative word of Eru Ilúvatar («*Eä!* Let these things Be!») which puts into action the Music of the Ainur and creates the universe («*Eä*, the World that Is») <sup>122</sup>. And both the Music and the divine word «*Eä!*» precede and determine the «*ele*» of the Elves. These, therefore, represent the sub-creative power that, in the ancient semantic unity, collaborates with the divine Creation, naming the world performatively – and therefore poetically and mythologically. The word «*ele*» is «the moment of semantic unity» in which «stars, light, the heavens, the word, perception, all are one»<sup>123</sup>. It follows that the expression «to make speech» must be un-

117 *Letters*, n. 131 fn. 16, 144, 181.

118 *S*, p. 19 f.

119 Flieger 2002, p. 72.

120 *S*, p. 172.

121 *WJ*, p. 362.

122 *S*, p. 5.

123 Smith 2007, p. 131.

derstood in a double sense, meaning both that the Elves *spoke* and that they *created the language*. But this same act is already the cause of a fragmentation in the perception of reality: «The elves give names to the things they perceive: reality is thus fragmented into a series of separate objects, each with a name, and speech starts to be made»<sup>124</sup>. Hence, «*ele*» is also «the agent of their separation, dividing the seers from the seen and at the same time characterizing those see-ers by what they perceive»<sup>125</sup>.

Yet the division between *see-er* and *seen* does not occur within a separative and rigid relation. The Elves, in fact, perceive a phenomenon and, acquiring it, establish the *see-er/seen* relation (*scissional relation*) but, at the same time, through this act they discover themselves as perceptive (Eldar) and speaking (Quendi) creatures (*conjunctive relation*).

In this passage from the *Silmarillion*, therefore, it does not happen, as Müller would have liked, that a name capable of designating a concrete object is extended by catachresis to more abstract concepts – and that, being misunderstood, it eventually generates a mythology –; instead, a semantic unity of world, signifier, sign and signified is given which is fragmented in a complex linguistic system, a perception that is one with its object and with the act of naming that designates it, which results in a metaphorical fragmentation of the meaning.

All this has a very clear confirmation in terms of Barfield's theory:

The first Elven word is a response to the percept "to shine," and carries exactly that primal unity of meaning and perception that Barfield insists words must once have had. Response

to light is the initial impulse behind Elven language, giving it form and direction. Equally important, it gives the Elves a sense of themselves as perceiving creatures<sup>126</sup>.

On closer inspection, in fact, the history of Tolkien's fictional world is entirely marked by a series of fragmentations and diminutions of the primeval Light. The first source of light in Arda were the two Lamps of the Valar, which illuminated the whole world «in a changeless day»<sup>127</sup>. These were destroyed by Melkor, so the Valar, having withdrawn into Aman, raised the two Trees there. Their light was preserved in the Silmarils created by Fëanor – in what constitutes «the last great act of sub-creation in Tolkien's world»<sup>128</sup>. Then, when Melkor and Ungoliant destroyed the Trees and cast the world in «an Unlight, in which things seemed to be no more, and which eyes could not pierce, for it was void»<sup>129</sup>, the Valar created the Sun and the Moon with the last flower and the last fruit of the Two Trees. As Tolkien himself states, «the Light of Valinor (derived from light before any fall) is the light of art undivorced from reason, that sees things both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or sub-creatively) and says that they are good — as beautiful. The light of Sun (or Moon) is derived from the Trees only after they were sullied by Evil»<sup>130</sup>. The Sun and the Moon are no more than «mere reminders of the light that is gone»<sup>131</sup>, while the Silmarils contain «the last remnant of the unsullied light of Paradise»<sup>132</sup>. They «embody light as a physical reality, tangible matter that can be touched, handled, and worked»<sup>133</sup>. Therefore, the creation of the Silmarils is a perfect example of how the primeval "to shine" has been fragmented from a «definite spiritual reality»

124 *Ivi*, p. 131.

125 Flieger 2002, p. 74.

126 *Ivi*, p. 74.

127 *S*, p. 12.

128 Flieger 2002, p. 98. Cf. *Ivi*, p. 109: «Fëanor is the last and in many ways the most important of the subcreators who figure in Tolkien's history of the light. His creation is both a synthesis and a splintering, and as such vividly illustrates the paradox at the heart of the mythology». Da questo splendore inizia la rovina sua e del popolo elfico.

129 *S*, p. 33. About the Unlight, see Flieger 2002, p. 108.

130 *Letters*, n. 131 fn. 15.

131 Flieger 2002, p. 121.

132 *Letters*, n. 297.

133 Flieger 2002, p. 107 f.

to «pure human thinking» and «physical light»: the latter is worked by Fëanor and instilled in the three jewels. As it becomes clear, therefore:

*The Silmarillion* is all about light, light treated in just that manner that Barfield proposed and defended. It is something that begins as “a definite spiritual reality,” becomes divided into “pure human thinking” and “physical light,” and further divides, both as percepts and as words, into a myriad fragments, all of which serve to express and describe Tolkien’s world and those who dwell in it<sup>134</sup>.

On the other hand, the polarity of light and dark that defines the physical and spiritual realities of Tolkien’s Secondary World is reflected in the languages of Arda and in their history. As Christopher Tolkien notes:

Those languages were conceived, of course, from the very beginning in a deeply ‘historical’ way: they were embodied in a history, the history of the Elves who spoke them, in which was to be found, as it evolved, a rich terrain for linguistic separation and interaction<sup>135</sup>.

On a level that transcends from philology to philosophy, Flieger states:

Inspired by light and imbued with the consciousness of its meaning, Elven language, in its fragmentation from whole perception into many views and tongues, illustrates precisely the principle of splintered light that Tolkien made the guiding image of his “Mythopoeia” poem. Moreover, the splintering process, while it breaks and diffuses the whole, the White Light, nevertheless makes visible the color spectrum, giving rise to light of many hues. Since Tolkien has deliberately linked light and language, the same will inevitably be true of the languages of his world. The breaking-up of perception into ever more discrete units will lead to narrowed but at the same time more precise expression and therefore greater freedom in the interplay of words and to an infinite variety of combinations in that “mythical grammar” that is the instrument of sub-creation<sup>136</sup>.

*The splintering of the Light into the lights is, consequently, the fragmentation of the Word into the words: a necessary change*

which does not invalidate the original Light/Word, but which allows the world to be known in an ever more precise way. Just as the conscience and experience of the world of those who speak changes, revealing degrees of decreasing light intensity, so does language change over time. Tolkien’s *Legendarium* represents the fragmentation of language as a historical phenomenon that arises from the division of the Elves into various peoples. Thus, in the *Silmarillion* we read that, following the summons by the Valar, Ingwë, Finwë and Elwë went to Valinor as ambassadors; back in Middle-earth, they exhorted the other Elves to answer the call. Not all Elves agreed: so, the name *Eldar*, that originally designated all Elves, was used, with the addition of the prefix *tar-*, “high”, only for those who went to Valinor. The *Tareldar*, the “High Elves”, were those who passed the Great Sea and reached Valinor. And, because they dwelt in light, were also called *Calaquendi*, “Elves of the Light”. Those who chose not to go and stayed in Middle-earth were instead called *Avari*, “Unwilling”, or *Moriquendi*, “Elves of Darkness”.

The Quendi, “those that speak with voices,” first spoke because they perceived the stars, fragments of light. The name *Calaquendi*, a refinement and intensification of that original light-speech complex, would literally mean “light-speakers” or “speakers of light.” Translated with equal literality, *Moriquendi* would mean “dark-speakers.”<sup>137</sup>

In both cases, the primeval perception is polarized in the first possible division, *that between light and darkness*. And it is reflected in the language and, consequently, creates the identity of the speakers: *those who see the light, those who will not*. Further division in the Elven peoples occurred later. The *Calaquendi*, according to the degree of readiness with which they responded to the call of the Valar, distinguished themselves in *Vanyar* (“Fair Elves”), *Noldor* (“Deep Elves”) and *Teleri* (“Lastcomers”). Those of the *Teleri* who remained in Mid-

134 *Ivi*, p. 70.

135 LR, p. 341.

136 Flieger 2002, p. 70.

137 *Ivi*, p. 82.

dle-earth when their kin travelled across the Great Sea were called *Sindar*, “Gray-elves” or “Elves of the Twilight”<sup>138</sup>. They therefore occupy an “intermediate space” between *Calaquendi* and *Moriquendi*, between knowledge and ignorance of the Light.

Gradually, the language originally spoken by all the Elves also fragmented into Quenya (spoken in Valinor) and Sindarin (spoken in Middle-earth). Again, the difference between the two languages

is an index of the greater sense of separation from light felt by the Elves of Middle-earth. Quenya takes its name directly from the word for light-inspired speech. Sindarin is filtered, formed from Quenya *sinda*, “grey,” a word that itself is passed through another language to bring diminished light<sup>139</sup>.

After the Darkening of Valinor, many of the *Noldor* forsook Aman and returned to Middle-earth in pursuit of Melkor. But after the Kinslaying at Alqualondë, the king of the Sindar Elu Thingol cut off all contact with the *Noldor* and outlawed Quenya in his kingdom. So «In many parts of the land the *Noldor* and the Sindar became welded into one people, and spoke the same [Sindarin] tongue»<sup>140</sup>. In this way the *Noldor* were “assimilated” into Middle-earth life:

If words express perception, then by the same token they can alter it. In abandoning Quenya for Sindarin, the *Noldor* exchange one vehicle of perception for another. Increasingly distanced from the light, they become more in tune with the character and the beauty of Middle-earth<sup>141</sup>.

The languages that flourished in Middle-earth over the ages were increasingly linked to the new environment and constituted a further diminution of the primeval Light/Word. This is especially true for the languages of Men, derived from Adûna-

ic (Adûnayân) spoken in Númenor in the Second Age. After the Akallabêth, the Faithful led by Elendil, who had taken refuge in Middle-earth, abandoned Adûnaic and adopted the language of the “colonies”, heavily influenced by Sindarin. This would then develop in Westron (Adûni), the Common Speech (Sôval Phârë) of Middle-earth, the language that Men «learned of elves» and which over time has lost the ancient ability to describe the wonderfulness.

So far, we have seen how the dynamics between light and shadow are reflected in the languages of Arda. A further reflection concerns the correspondence between signifier and meaning, which emerges clearly in the names used by Tolkien for his characters. In fact, not only did Tolkien always strive «to make his names sound appropriate to the things they denominated»<sup>142</sup>, but he also considered them the starting point of the stories («To me a name comes first and the story follows»<sup>143</sup>).

A few examples will suffice. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf introduces himself to Bilbo with these words:

I do know your name, Mr. Bilbo Baggins. And you do know my name, though you don't remember that I belong to it. I am Gandalf, and Gandalf means me!<sup>144</sup>

What do these words mean? Perhaps, not that he is the only one to bear the name “Gandalf” but that the relationship between his name and his person is coessential: therefore, he specifies «I belong to it» and not «it belongs to me». To understand better we need to specify the nature of the character. Gandalf is a Maia from Valinor, a spirit similar to the Valar, albeit with lesser powers. Together with other four spirits,

138 Their rulers were Elu Thingol – who led the Teleri to Aman – and Melian, who belongs to the Maiar and was a bearer of light like Varda. In fact, while the latter had «the light of Ilúvatar in her face» (S, p. 26), Melian wore «the light of Aman» (S, p. 55) in her face. As Flieger 2002 comments, p. 92: «Melian is yet a diminution of the primal light. The light she brings to the Sindar is more than they have had in Middle-earth, less than they might have known had they gone to Valinor. She represents the middle ground of their possible choices».

139 Flieger 2002, p. 92.

140 S, p. 117.

141 Flieger 2002, p. 135.

142 Smith 2007, p. 23.

143 *Letters*, n. 165.

144 H, p. 33.

the Istari (Sorcerers), he was sent to Middle-earth around the 11th century of the Third Era to counter the growing power of Sauron. As stated in *Appendix B* of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Istari «revealed their true names to few, but used such names as were given to them»<sup>145</sup>. Hence Gandalf states:

*Many are my names in many countries, he [Gandalf] said. Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves; Olórin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten, in the South Incánus, in the North Gandalf; to the East I go not*<sup>146</sup>.

Gandalf – a name Tolkien took from *Vóluspá* (str. 12) – means “Elf of the wand” or “Wand-elf”<sup>147</sup>. Mithrandir, Gandalf’s Sindarin name, means “Grey Pilgrim” or “Grey Wanderer”<sup>148</sup>: where “grey” does not refer to the colour of his clothing but refers to the light/shadow polarity discussed above, and which is evidently fundamental in the character of Gandalf who, returned from the dead, passes from Grey to White. Again, Olórin comes from the Quenya *olor* or *olos* (“dream”), referring «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»<sup>149</sup>, as if to reaffirm the unity of perception and consciousness in the ancient semantic unity. And again, Tharkûn means “Staff man” and Incánus may mean “grey-haired” or “North-spy”<sup>150</sup>. Those given to Gandalf by the peoples he met during his wanderings are not proper names but *nomina loquentia*, epithets that reveal his nature, in different degrees, as if they were stories – that’s why he belongs to them and not vice versa. And it is as if, through these names, the entire linguistic history of Arda is retraced: therefore, Olórin recalls the ancient unity of perception and word and Mithrandir the fragmentation of language; Gandalf, in turn, manifests all the distance of Men from

the primeval wonderfulness of the world: they do not know “*what* he is” and give him a name that is half wrong (Gandalf is not an elf) and half concentrated on an exterior element of the character, his staff. Gandalf, therefore, belongs to his name as this signifies him, describes more “*what* he is” than “*who* he is”.

Something similar happens in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo asks Goldberry who Tom Bombadil is:

‘Fair lady!’ said Frodo again after a while. ‘Tell me, if my asking does not seem foolish, who is Tom Bombadil?’

‘He is,’ said Goldberry, staying her swift movements and smiling. Frodo looked at her questioningly. ‘He is, as you have seen him,’ she said in answer to his look. ‘He is the Master of wood, water, and hill.’

‘Then all this strange land belongs to him?’

‘No indeed!’ she answered, and her smile faded. ‘That would indeed be a burden,’ she added in a low voice, as if to herself. ‘The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master.’<sup>151</sup>

Later, Frodo repeats the question to Tom himself:

‘Who are you, Master?’ he asked.

‘Eh, what?’ said Tom sitting up, and his eyes glinting in the gloom. ‘Don’t you know my name yet? That’s the only answer. Tell me, who are you, alone, yourself and nameless? But you are young and I am old. Eldest, that’s what I am’<sup>152</sup>.

Several readers have interpreted Goldberry’s response as an allusion to the biblical «I am» and, therefore, as a reference to the divinity of Tom Bombadil. But, as Tolkien himself specifies, Goldberry’s and Tom Bombadil’s answers refer to the «mystery of *names*»:

145 LotR, p. 1084 f.

146 Cf. Ivi, p. 670.

147 See Shippey 2000, p. 15 f.

148 Hammond, Scull 2005, p. 320.

149 UT, p. 396.

150 Hammond, Scull 2005, p. 471 f. See UT, p. 399 f. On these names see Gilson 2007.

151 LotR, p. 124.

152 Ivi, p. 131.

You may be able to conceive of your unique relation to the Creator without a name – can you: for in such a relation pronouns become proper nouns? But as soon as you are in a world of other finites with a similar, if each unique and different, relation to Prime Being, who are you? Frodo has asked not ‘what is Tom Bombadil’ but ‘Who is he’. We and he no doubt often laxly confuse the questions. Goldberry gives what I think is the correct answer. We need not go into the sublimities of ‘I am that am’ – which is quite different from *he is*. She adds as a concession a statement of part of the ‘what’. He is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. [...] [He] is then an ‘allegory’, or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are ‘other’* and wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything with the knowledge<sup>153</sup>.

Tom Bombadil is the Eldest and this seems to be all that can be said about him: the other names he possesses – in Sindarin he is Iarwain Ben-adar, “oldest and fatherless”, for the Dwarves he is Forn, “(belonging to) ancient (days)” and among the Northmen Orald, “very ancient”<sup>154</sup> – only confirm this quality. As for Gandalf, his is an identity which, however elusive, is conceivable in a «unique relation to the Creator without a name»:

As the oldest being, Tom comes before history and therefore cannot be related to or associated with anything but himself, his own existence. Tom is pre-language and therefore not formed by language [...] Like Väinämöinen, the “eternal singer” of the Finnish *Kalevala*, Tom is his world’s oldest sentient being. He is fatherless, self-begotten, preexistent. He simply “is”.<sup>155</sup>

While Frodo – who *lives in language*, and in a separative language – without a name would be «halo», lacking any point of reference. From this point of view, the many epithets that Bilbo uses to introduce himself to Smaug in *The Hobbit* deserve attention:

“You have nice manners for a thief and a liar,” said the dragon. “You seem familiar with my name,<sup>4</sup> but I don’t seem to remember smelling you before. Who are you and where do you come from, may I ask?”

“You may indeed! I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the hills my paths led. And through the air. I am he that walks unseen.”

“So I can well believe,” said Smaug, “but that is hardly your usual name.”

“I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number.”

“Lovely titles!” sneered the dragon. “But lucky numbers don’t always come off.”

“I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water. I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me.”

“These don’t sound so creditable,” scoffed Smaug. “I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer; and I am Barrel-rider,” went on Bilbo beginning to be pleased with his riddling.

“That’s better!” said Smaug. “But don’t let your imagination run away with you!”<sup>156</sup>

These are epithets that, at a stage in which language is fragmented, exercise a performative function, «describing actions arising out of specific situations. Bilbo’s new names are what he is, and that is not who he used to be. They are what he *does*»<sup>157</sup>. It is interesting to note that when Bilbo leaves the safe boundaries of the Shire and ventures into a wonderful and dangerous world, he goes acquiring names that qualify “*what* he is”, fulfilling a function similar to that of names possessed by more ancient creatures such as Gandalf and Tom Bombadil.

Another interesting aspect emerges, when Treebeard meets Merry and Pippin announces that he will not reveal his name, because it would take too long:

For I am not going to tell you *my* name, not yet at any rate.’ A queer half-knowing, half-humorous look came with a green flicker into his eyes. ‘For one thing it would take a long while: my name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time; so *my* name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language, in the Old Entish as you might say<sup>158</sup>.

153 Letters, n. 153.

154 LotR, p. 265. See Hammond, Scull 2005, p. 128.

155 Flieger 2012, p. 245.

156 H, p. 279.

157 Cfr. Flieger 2012, p. 246.

158 Ibid.

Names, therefore, tell stories and, like stories, they can grow like Treebeard's. But they can also decrease, as in the case of the domain name of Galadriel and Celeborn, which was originally *Laurelindórenan lindelorendor malinornélión ornemalin*<sup>159</sup>, "the valley where the trees in a golden light sing musically, a land of music and dreams, there are yellow trees there, it is a tree-yellow land"<sup>160</sup>; over time, the "contracted" form *Lau-relinórenan*, "Land of the Valley of the Singing Gold", prevailed; and finally the last form, «a Quenya-Sindarin hybrid»<sup>161</sup>, *Lóthlorien*, "Dreamflower", often further reduced to *Lórien*, "Dream".

This progressive shrinking of the name becomes an indicator of Lórien's regressively receding relationship to Time and Change. Lórien is out of time in both sense of that expression. Its proper time has run out so that in the natural course of history it would have decayed. But it has not; it is outside Time, artificially preserved, the experience of time slowed almost to a standstill by Galadriel's elven ring<sup>162</sup>.

If, therefore, from a metanarrative point of view, «a name comes first and the story follows», it can be said that within the narrative *the name is the story itself*.

### CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how, starting from a first influence of Barfield's theory, that can be fully felt in the poem *Mythopoeia*, in the essays of the 1930s Tolkien clarified his reflections on the relations between world, perception, language and myth in the light of a theory of "sub-creation" that he developed more and more, until it became the centre of his thought. We have also seen how this theory has found full application in the narrative development of his *Legendarium*.

It is only a starting point open to further analysis. For now, we limit ourselves to noting how, even from a performative point of view, the theories of Barfield and Tolkien are fruitful.

We can hold back for now a pleasant feeling: that the Secondary World that Tolkien has developed throughout his life can *recover* our view of the Primary World, making us see things as we are meant to. And that it makes us see the stars, as the Elves did, «like flowers beneath the ancient song».

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159 LotR, p. 467.

160 Letters, n. 230.

161 Flieger 2012, p. 248.

162 Tolkien compares this work to that of the embalmers who try to stop time. See Letters, n. 154.

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