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The Lost Road as Faërian Drama¹

‘[I]n Faërian drama you are in a dream
that some other mind is weaving,
and the knowledge of that alarming fact
may slip from your grasp.’ (OFS.49)

‘*Faërie* contains many things besides elves . . .
it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky;
and the earth, and all things that are in it . . .
and ourselves, mortal men,
when we are enchanted.’ (OFS.14)

A key element in J. R. R. Tolkien’s world-building is his identification of his fantasy world as our own planet at a time in its legendary past. Tolkien adopted the very medieval motif—found for example in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’—that our world once contained many marvels that have since receded.

‘In th’olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour . . .
Al was this land fulfild of fairye . . .
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago,
But now kan no man se none elves mo’

—Chaucer, ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’,
lines 857, 859, 863–864
(Fisher page 120)²

Middle-earth as presented in *The Lord of the Rings* is towards the end of a transitional phase, well along the way to devolving into the world as we know it today, disenchanted but with echoes of the lost past still hovering on the edge of perception for those with the aptitude to see or hear. This is a key element present from the very earliest stage of his mythology—see ‘The Trees of Kortirion’ (BLT I .33ff and Rateliff 2006 .67)—but in Tolkien’s latter days he became increasingly concerned over the mechanism by which this change worked.

This speculative look at some of Tolkien’s late speculative writings focuses on Tolkien’s efforts to effect the transition from a desirable fantasy world to a familiar mundane one, particularly through his use of what he calls Faërian Drama.

¹ A shortened form of this piece was presented at the 56th Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo in May 2021 as part of the ‘Medieval World-Building: Tolkien, His Precursors and Legacies’ panel presided over by Kristine Swank.

² See Briggs, *The Vanishing People*, for this persistent motif of elves withdrawing from our shared world.

Part I 'The Numenorean Catastrophe'

Evidence of just how far Tolkien was willing to take this demythologizing lies in a short metaphysical essay called 'The Numenorean Catastrophe & End of "Physical" Arda', written sometime between 1959 and 1966. In it Tolkien asked the question: where does Valinor go when it goes away near the end of the Second Age? His answer turns out to be somewhat surprising.

Is Aman 'removed' or destroyed at Catastrophe?

*It was physical. Therefore it could not be removed, without remaining visible as part of Arda or as a new satellite!*³ It must either remain as a landmass *bereft of its former inhabitants* or be destroyed.

I think now best that it should *remain* a physical *landmass* (America!) . . . as Manwe . . . said to the Numenoreans: 'It is not the *land* that is hallowed . . . it is hallowed by the dwellers there'—the Valar.

It would just become *an ordinary land*, an addition to M[iddle] [E]arth the European-African-Asiatic contiguous landmass . . . The *flora and fauna* . . . would become ordinary beasts and plants with usual conditions of mortality.

Aman and Eressea would be the *memory* of the *Valar and Elves* of the former land.

Compare this with Tolkien's words in *Letter to Waldman* (circa 1951):

Thereafter there is no visible dwelling of the divine or immortal on earth. Valinor (or Paradise) and even Eressea are removed, remaining only in the memory of the earth. (*Letters*.156)

As for the Elves themselves, Tolkien wrote in the 1959 piece

The Catastrophe represents . . . a foretaste of the End of Arda . . . In a sense Eru moved forward the End of Arda as far as it concerned the Elves . . . [V]iewed against the enormous stretch of ages the twilight period of 2nd/3rd Age is surely quite short and abrupt!

The Elves are dying. They whether in Aman or outside will become *fëar* [spirits] housed only in memory until the true End (150, 152)

³ Here we may detect echoes of Tolkien's thought at one point that Melkor made the moon, ripping it from the Earth. See my blogpost entry 'Weird Tolkien III: Melkor Makes the Moon' (June 2019).

<http://sacnoths.blogspot.com/2019/06/weird-tolkien-iii-melkor-makes-moon.html>
[accessed April 21st 2021]

The key point here, I think, is that Tolkien rejects what we may call the Velikovsky option.⁴ He insists that Eldamar and Valinor still exist as physical entities, still part of our world, but have become wholly disenchanting. No longer hallowed, they are simply continents like any other (that is, North and South America).

This raises the question: when Bilbo and Frodo sail to a far green country at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* they are clearly not coming to America, yet their destination (Elvenhome) no longer exists within the physical world. It has been ‘removed, remaining only in the memory of the earth’ (*Letter to Waldman*.156). I take it, then, that the hobbits are travelling in time, entering ‘the memory of the world’, becoming part of that memory.⁵

Part II ‘A Criteria of Credibility’

By the Lost Road it is possible to access a place that no longer exists or at least has been drastically altered in the present day. We are told in the *Akallabeth*

a Straight Road must still be, for those that are permitted to find it . . . the old road and the path of the memory of the West (*Akallabeth*.281).

As may be seen in his Atlantean speculations, one great difficulty bedeviling Tolkien towards the end of his career was his reluctant decision to attempt a reconciliation between modern-day science and the self-consistent rules governing his fantasy. This led to various attempts at accommodation, as when he set the fantasy elements of his subcreated world within a pocket universe, encircled by a larger world (the rest of creation) wherein the rule of science held sway (see the Dome of Arda, ‘Myths Transformed III–IV’, X.385–388). This long slow retreat from fantasy seems to have grown on him by a series of steps over roughly a decade, but once he had arrived at the end of this line of thinking he found himself in difficulties. I have argued elsewhere that this decision played a major role in Tolkien’s failure to complete the *Silmarillion* (Rateliff 2020). For here I’d like to try to trace the steps that led him to this impasse.

⁴ In his widely read and widely disparaged 1950 book *Worlds in Collision*, Immanuel Velikovsky argued that massive disruptions of the solar system (such as Venus achieving its current orbit) had happened within recorded history (e.g., the parting of the Red Sea). By contrast, Tolkien’s astronomy is good enough that he knows any event sufficient to tear away enough of the Earth’s mass to form a body the size of the Moon would not be survivable by any humans of that era. As evidence of this, note that when he considered incorporating the idea that the Moon had been ripped from the Earth by Morgoth, he placed the event back in pre-Elven times, ‘before yet there was any thing that grew or walked on Earth’ (*Ainulindale C* text*, HME.X.41). For an example of how widespread the idea was in his time, especially in fantasy and science fiction, see Hugh Lofting’s *Doctor Dolittle on the Moon* (1928), an entry in the popular Dr. Dolittle series, which we know were popular among the Tolkien children.

⁵ Elsewhere, in his ‘Re-incarnation of Elves’ essay, Tolkien explicitly states that matter can be converted (‘taken up’) into spirit; the elves’ physical bodies disappear but are preserved by their spirits’ memory (Tolkien ‘Fragments’.148).

• Step One: *On Fairy-Stories* (circa 1943).⁶

It is I think more or less universally acknowledged that this seminal essay formed the cornerstone of Tolkien's theory and practice as a writer, particularly in regard to his thinking regarding subcreation and secondary belief. It is also where he put down most of what little we actually have on paper about Faërian Drama, allusive as it may be. (TOFS.63–64, 112, 138, 294).

• Step Two: *The Notion Club Papers* (December 1944 through August 1946).

We tend to treat *On Fairy-Stories* as a definitive statement. But the evidence suggests Tolkien's thought continued to evolve. If we look at *The Notion Club Papers*, written immediately afterwards, perhaps even overlapping with his fine-tuning of the *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* text,⁷ we see that in addition to internal consistency Tolkien now holds that a work of scientifiction must not violate real-world fact. If it is to be acceptable as successful science fiction, it must satisfy what he calls 'a criterion of credibility' (NCP.167).

As an example, he has Guildford (whom I take to be the C. S. Lewis analogue within the Club) criticize Wells' *Cavorite*, the anti-gravity metal that makes possible the space-voyage to the Moon in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Tolkien is willing to grandfather in Wells, writing a half-century before,⁸ as an ingenious primitive (NCP.165). But for a writer writing in the modern day Guildford was emphatic:

A gravitation-insulator won't do. **Gravity can't be treated like that.** It's fundamental. It's a statement **by** the Universe of where you are **in** the Universe, and the Universe can't be tricked by a surname with *ite* stuck on the end (NCP.166; emphasis mine).

Guildford goes on to characterize as 'mere abracadabra in bogus "scientific" form' (ibid) the work of authors who make cavalier use of motifs such as faster-than-speed-of-light travel (dismissed as 'incredible') and concludes

I don't ask for any greater degree of probability from my author: just a possibility not wholly at variance with what we know (ibid.167).

I suggest we take Tolkien's word choice *incredible* literally: lacking credibility; impossible to believe—especially given his use of the phrase 'criteria of credibility' in the very next sentence.

Granted, Tolkien is writing about science fiction here (or 'scientifiction' as it was then known), but the two genres of science fiction and fantasy were not then as distinct as they have since

⁶ The relevant portions of *On Fairy-Stories* for our purposes seem not to have been in the original 1939 lecture but entered in with the 1943 revision (the 'B-Text') in which Tolkien transformed his lecture into an essay. See TOFS.288.

⁷ Tolkien even includes within *The Notion Club Papers* an oblique reference to *On Fairy-Stories* and 'Elvish Drama'—which is clearly Faërian Drama under another name. See NCP.193 & 216–217).

⁸ Remembering also that according to the fiction of the frame story the events of NCP take place forty years in the future (1980s) from the time Tolkien wrote these passages (1940s).

become. In any case, thereafter Tolkien increasingly acts as though this stricture were in place. Evidence of his attempting to act according to this new self-imposed restriction show up almost at once, with his renewed work on his primal creation myth.

• **Step Three: *Ainulindale* (1946ff) & Letter to Farrer (October 1948).**

This creation myth seems to have been the point where Tolkien resumed work on *The Silmarillion* after having broken off the 1937 *Quenta* a decade before to concentrate on ‘The New Hobbit’. Certainly he was deeply engrossed in it right around the time he completed the draft of *The Lord of the Rings* in September 1948. But according to the dating worked out by Christopher Tolkien (HME.X.4), Tolkien seems to have started drafting the new more scientifically credible ‘Round Earth’ version of the *Ainulindale* back in 1946, which would place it at a time when he was either still working on *The Notion Club Papers* or had just set it aside (for good, as it turned out). In any case, we know from his letter to Katharine Farrer that by October 1948 he had worked out a bifurcated text,⁹ producing in parallel both the ‘Old Flat World’ story and the new ‘Round World’ story.

• **Step Four: Equivocation.**

Having worked out a more scientifically congruent option, Tolkien quickly retreated from this, setting aside the ‘Round Earth’ version and developing the ‘Flat Earth’ version instead. Thus at the very onset of his latter-days, post *LotR* era work on the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien was already expressing his dissatisfaction with the Flat World, saying to Katherine Farrer that

The Elvish myths are ‘Flat World’. A pity really but it is too integral to change it (JRRT to Farrer, draft, X.5).

Despite Farrer’s reply that ‘I like the Flat Earth versions best’ (X.6), it’s clear that Tolkien continued his search for some grand all-incompassing solution which would leave in place as much as possible of the old material but now in a new context.¹⁰

Thus in *The Notion Club Papers* Tolkien adds to his theories from *On Fairy-Stories* about Subcreation and Secondary Belief what he calls ‘a criteria of credibility’: arguing that in order to achieve secondary belief a modern work of sciencefiction must not contradict basic laws of physics—a decision which was to cause him great difficulties as he sought to reconcile the competing Flat World/Round World myths.

Part III

‘The Other Side’

⁹ For other examples of Tolkien presenting two alternate texts giving different versions of events, see the Prancing Pony chapters in *The Lord of the Rings* (HME.VI.148, 156–160, 171–172).

¹⁰ E.g., a geocentric world within some form of heliocentric system, the whole set off from the greater cosmos that surrounds it.

Falling back on one of the core concepts of his mythology might have provided Tolkien with a way out, had he chosen to use it. Instead of physics, metaphysics might provide the key.

Awaking at Rivendell, Frodo with the help of Gandalf tries to sort out some of his recent experiences. Speaking of Glorfindel, Gandalf says

‘you saw him for a moment as he is upon **the other side**’ (LotR.239; emphasis mine).

This raises the question: the other side of what? We are told that Frodo saw

- a white figure that shone and did not grow dim (LotR.239)
- a shining figure of white light (.231)
- a white light . . . shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil (.225)

—By contrast, we are told of the Shadow World that

‘you had become visible to them, being . . . on the threshold of their world’ (.239)

‘while you wore the Ring . . . you were half within the wraith-world itself, and they might have seized you. You could see them, and they could see you’ (.238)

From Frodo’s perspective, once he has been tainted with the morgul blade

during the day things about him faded to shadows of ghostly grey. He almost welcomed the coming of night, for then the world seemed less pale and empty (.228)

But it is not just the Shadow World that can intrude this way. Gandalf, who with his ‘wizard’s eye’ sees a hint of transparency in Frodo after his experiences on the way to Rivendell, muses that ‘in the end . . . He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can’ (.239). This is particularly poignant in retrospect, given that **Frodo’s fate is in essence to become an elf**: to lose the world of Middle-earth and vanish (perhaps literally) into the Faërie-land in the West.

Clearly the Shadow World and the Light World both overlap with the Waking world, occasionally breaking through and affecting it for good or ill. But while the Shadow World seems parasitic, the Light World enhances nature, so that a simple meal of bread and fruit (apples and berries) with a draught of what seems to be some light liqueur (*LotR*.95–96), such as the wandering elves share with the hobbits at Woodhall, ‘remained in [Sam’s] memory as one of the chief events of his life’ (.96), while Frodo delights in hearing Elvish spoken by elves (.96) and Pippin ‘felt in a waking dream’ (.95). And for good reason.

I would suggest that we have here a minor Faërian Drama in which the elves are knowing participants, enhancing what they acknowledge as ‘poor fare’. The elves are thus better able to enjoy their simple meal, having raised each element therein to its quintessence. The hobbits also

partake but unknowingly—as if in a waking dream. I would further suggest that another name for this enhanced world would be Faërie. And just as the Shadow-world was created by Morgoth and Sauron,¹¹ so too the World of Light seems to have been consciously created by the Elves.

That it is not their native habitat is explicitly stated by Tolkien in *On Fairy-Stories*:

[Faërian Drama] is for them a form of Art . . . They do not live in it, though they can, perhaps, afford to spend more time at it than human artists can. The Primary World, Reality, of elves and men is the same, if differently valued and perceived (TOFS.63).

Just as Manwe said, speaking of Valinor, “It is not the *land* that is hallowed . . . it is hallowed by the dwellers there”.¹² So too we can say of the elves it is not the land but the people who bring the enchantment, using nature as a backdrop to be enhanced (‘enchanted’) by means of Faërian Dramas. Faërie can thus be seen as a collaborative lucid dream with permeable borders created by a multitude of elves over a vast period of time.

In short: Faërie and Faërian Drama are one and the same.

Part IV Strange Paths

Mortals can be invited into Faërie, as with the hobbits at Woody End, or when the Fellowship is invited into Lorien (aka Lothlórien:: The Dream Flower). Mortals sometimes stumble into these waking dreams but cannot tell dream from reality, with sometimes comic (Thorin & Company’s attempts to join the Elvenking’s feast) and sometimes tragic (‘The Sea Bell’) results. But we are told that the elves themselves are not so deluded (TOFS.63). We even get to witness what one Faërian Drama looks like from the outside. As the Three Walkers continue their dogged pursuit of Merry and Pippin’s abductors, we are told of Legolas that

He could sleep, if sleep it could be called by Men, resting his mind in the strange paths of elvish dreams, even as he walked open-eyed in the light of this world. (*LotR*.449)

¹¹ We might ask: if the World of Light is created by the elves, might not the World of Shadow have been created by the orcs? We know that Morgoth preferred to work through agents, especially in his latter days (cf. X.396). If we adopt, for the sake of argument, that the orcs derive from the elves—a position Tolkien sometimes held (cf. *Annals of Aman* X.74 & .109) and which Christopher Tolkien chose to use in the 1977 *Silmarillion* (Silm.94)—it seems conceivable that they retained an innate power which, when corrupted, darkened all their works. This parallel is strengthened by the fact that, like the World of Light, the World of Darkness is similarly sustained by the Rings of Power and dissipates when they fail. Even Mordor becomes an arid but no longer sinister land when freed from the nightmare of Sauron’s presence.

My thanks to Janice Coulter for having suggested this line of argument.

¹² This seems to be a rephrasing, casting into Manwe’s own words those of his emissaries in *The Akallabeth*: “For it is not the land of Manwe that makes its people deathless, but the Deathless that dwell therein have hallowed the land” (Silm .264)

This seems to indicate that he has focused his mind on a freely chosen diversion from the exhausting and dreary task to which he has committed himself—what in terms of Tolkien’s criteria in *On Fairy-Stories* would be called Escape and Recovery. C. S. Lewis made a very similar comment in his review of *The Lord of the Rings* about the value of enhancing the mundane with imagination:

The child enjoys his cold meat . . . by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story . . . the real things are more themselves . . . By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly. (Lewis .90)

Another example occurs back in Lorien, when Frodo sees from the outside a Faërian Drama Aragorn is experiencing and witnesses Aragorn interacting with somebody who is not actually *there* or, to be more specific, not *then*.

. . . a light was in his eyes. He was wrapped in some fair memory: and as Frodo looked at him he knew he beheld things as they once had been in this same place. For the grim years were removed from the face of Aragorn, and he seemed clothed in white, a young lord tall and fair; and he spoke . . . in the Elvish tongue to one whom Frodo could not see. *Arwen* . . . *namarie* he said (*LotR*.370).¹³

The most famous of all Faërian Dramas is the story of Luthien & Beren, particularly their fated meeting. There are so many versions of this major story in the legendarium, each with its distinct difference of emphasis, that here representative quotation becomes difficult.¹⁴ But it seems clear that the two, elf and mortal, in some sense inhabit different worlds that occupy the same space—in this case, a particular woods within the great forest of Doriath. After their initial encounter Beren sees and hears Luthien in fugitive glimpses over the better part of a year but cannot find her until, drawn by her song, he is able to enter her world just long enough to draw her into his.

He heard there oft the flying sound
Of feet as light as linden-leaves
Or music welling underground,
In hidden hollows quavering [*LotR* .204]

. . . wandering in path and mind

¹³ As Croft points out (Croft.38), elsewhere Aragorn, knowledgeable as ever, reveals that he knows of Faërian Drama. Seeing Arwen for the first time

he halted amazed, thinking he had strayed into a dream, or else that he had received **the gift of the Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen.**

(‘The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen’,
LotR.1095; emphasis mine)

¹⁴ The major texts for our purposes are

- ‘Light as Leaf on Linden Tree’, the poem used in *The Lord of the Rings*
- *The Lay of Leithian*, a major work appearing in *The Lays of Beleriand* (HME.III)
- and the 1937 *Quenta*, used to establish a base text for the 1977 *Silmarillion*, Chapter XIX.

he groped as one gone sudden blind
who seeks to grasp the hidden light
with faltering hands in more than night. [*Lay*.184, lines 782–785]

. . . he called to her, crying Tinúviel . . .
Then she halted in wonder, and fled no more [*Silm*.165]

Part V The Trees of Kortirion

Finally, we have ‘The Trees of Kortirion’, a poem containing a rare description of the elves’ fate in the mortal world after Faërie has withdrawn. That Tolkien considered this piece important is hinted at in his persistence in working and reworking the text. The first drafts date from very early on in the legendarium (1915, within a year of the first Eärendel poem). He returned to it and revised it in 1937, at the time he was hard at work on the 1937 *Silmarillion*. And he reworked it one final time in February 1962 as a possible candidate for inclusion in his 1962 collection *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. He ultimately omitted it from that volume on the grounds that it was ‘too long and too ambitious, and even if considered good enough would probably upset the boat’ (*BLT* I.32). It looks as if he had something he very much wanted to say but could not do so to his satisfaction, at least in this poem.

. . . the first-born in an elder day,
Immortal Elves . . .
Pass like a wind among the rustling trees
. . . voices calling from a time we do not know [47b, 48a, 50, 52]

Unseen the Elves go by . . . [92a]

The Elves are silent. But they do not die!
Here waiting they endure the winter fell
And silence. [123–125a]

(*BLT* I.39–43).

Or, to make much the same point in prose, Tolkien’s late essay ‘Laws and Customs among the Eldar’ (circa 1958) explains that ‘ere Arda ends[,] all the Eldalië on earth will have become spirits invisible to mortal eyes’ (*HME*.X.212).

It is the elves’ tragedy to have jointly created a work of many hands and minds, completely immersive, splendid beyond description, long-enduring, but in the end, inevitably, perishable. As must ultimately be all creations made of necessarily impermanent materials in a finite world subject to time and change. Hence the temptation to abandon the ever-changing mundane world and submerge themselves in the wonders they had created, devoting their efforts to preserving Faërie rather than remaining engaged in Middle-earth—what Treebeard calls ‘falling rather behind the world’ (*LotR* .488) and Tolkien more bluntly dubbed *embalming* (*Letters* .151, 197).

Despite their best efforts, when the power of the Three Rings fails at the end of the Third Age all that the Elves have preserved past its own time passes away. When the enchantment is broken the enhancement fades: Lorien becomes just a woodland of beautiful trees, the Barad-dur a tumbled pile of rocks. The Lost Road itself might, then, represent the grandest collaboration of them all, offering the fading elves at the end of the Third Age with the chance to enter their own illusion, to vanish into their own creation. Leaving only a few faded (literally: transparent) *fëar* behind. (HME.X.223),¹⁵ passing ghostlike through a disenchanting world.

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¹⁵ 'in these after-days more and more of the Elves . . . who linger in Middle-earth now refuse the summons of Mandos, and wander houseless in the world, unwilling to leave it and unable to inhabit it, haunting trees or springs or hidden places that once they knew' (HME.X.223).

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