

A history of song:

The transmission of memory in Middle-earth

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Simbelymynë foams about the greening barrows; beacons ablaze with the preservation of memories brought ever to mind when one's gaze falls upon their form while the distant sound of hoof-falls carry through tall grasses which sway hither and thither; moved a wind that blows down over the green, rolling landscape of Rohan. A wind upon which one may discern the far sound of steel crashing and a rage of horses. Such winds echo the oral tradition¹ and the continuity of memory. In the following I will examine the memory of the Rohirrim within the context of *The Lay of the Rohirrim*; constructed to commemorate Eorl the Young, First King of the Mark.

'Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn
that was blowing?
Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair
flowing?
Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire
glowing?
Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn
growing?
They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind
in the meadow;
The days have gone down in the West behind the hills
into shadow.
Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning.
Or behold the flowing years from the sea returning?''²

One is immediately aware of a similarity of *The Lament of the Rohirrim* in its opening strophe to that of strophe 92 of the Anglo-Saxon prose piece 'The Wanderer'

''Where has gone the steed? Where has gone the man?
Where has gone the giver of treasure? Where has gone
the place of the banquets? Where are the pleasures of the
hall? Alas, the gleaming chalice; alas, the armoured war-
rior; alas, the majesty of the prince! Truly, that time has
passed away, has grown dark under the helm of night as
though it had never been...''³

On first reading of *The Lament of the Rohirrim* one finds that it appears to reflect a past wherein lay a fruitful and glorious time. The 'forgotten poet' has constructed a lament in such a manner that its first four strophes form questions which

are then in turn followed by a strophe which appears to answer the preceding by the employment of natural and familiar occurrences which are fleeting; quickly passing into memory. The sixth strophe is more of a statement, yet again using allegory which, I submit, may allow the preceding strophes to allude to sun at its zenith under which the Mark prospered and flourished but now that sun has set into the ever encroaching menace of a darker present and on into the shadow of the past.

The final strophe, 'Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning...' may be seen, if I may be allowed to tempt conjecture, as representative of the pyres of the fallen Horse Lords. Although this is only, tentatively, viewed if one allows Aragorn's translation of the Lament of the Rohirrim into the common speech not to be wholly accurate in its morphology to that of the native tongue wherein the Lament of the Rohirrim was formed. If such was the case then the term 'dead wood' may have been a kenning⁴ for a warrior. Conversely the poet may simply be alluding to the poverty of the Mark's flora itself – upon which roofs were raised and gates constructed; here there is an image of a dearth of healthy, vibrant vegetation. Of a land that can no longer support its people. Yet if one were to permit the former it may permit one other aspect of a people passing into the mist of time – the dereliction of their religion. One is aware that Professor Tolkien shunned explicit references to religion in *The Lord of the Rings*⁵, yet the line, 'Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning...' may resonate as one imagines the smoke from the pyres rising heavenwards and into the arms of some celestial being.

The poet leaves one to ponder upon the present as, I feel, the lines opening the Lament of the Rohirrim were constructed to speak directly to a people living in the present rather than merely relate a formative event which resides in the past. This is the transmission of a memory conveyed in prose which carries to the present, in its form, faintly glowing embers of the tale-fires of times past.

Folk memory

In the context of Rohan the Lament of the Rohirrim signals a desire for a return to the years of strength and prosperity in a manner that is steeped in a symbolic well, the waters of which would be immediately recognisable and relative to a native of Rohan. This motif is a vehicle for the onward transmission of

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folk memory in a form that relates, through question, idiom and image a strong resonance in the present even though they were sounded in a dim past. Within the Lament of the Rohirrim one finds not only the apparel of war and strife but also the associated comforts of the hall such as a gentle music ebbing through curling tails of smoke from a great fire, above which great spits slowly rotate and the essences of victory linger. A further aspect of the Lament, which is also found in physical form carved upon the great pillars of Meduseld,⁶ is that of '[T]he bright hair blowing...' which not only evokes the youthful Eorl but has echoes in more contemporary lore where one finds that long, fair locks which remained unchecked and free-flowing served as symbol of health, a vigorous soul and happiness – a symbol of Kings.⁷

The Lament of the Rohirrim, I feel, forms a collective memory which, when voiced before an audience, will allow those listeners to, in a sense, collectively participate by their realisation of images compounded within the prose; an affinity of imagery kindled in minds which, though sundered from one another, become joined by a cultural template upon which those words feed and transform into important, self-defining images representing a continuity of motifs which are in turn prevalent and very evocative to the cultural descendant who now receives such voices from his past. The first four strophes serve to flesh out the warrior society of Rohan in a concise and direct manner that also mourns the passing of each defining attribute in turn.

Within the Lament one hears, I feel, of the inevitable passing, or final breaths, of a noble society. In the context of 'The Wanderer' the voice yearns for such a passing while, it would appear, coming to terms with the mutability and ephemeral nature of man's designs all of which are destined to fall and fade into night; that the immutable resides only in Heaven. The Lament of the Rohirrim, in isolation, possesses no such revelation. Indeed it may bring the thought 'What a dreadful, fear-darkened, sorrow-laden world we live in...'⁸ Yet The Lament is in itself a vehicle wherein those living are given the prospect of keeping the memories, or mind-hoards, of the past alive by the sombre celebration of those times through prose. This aspect is reinforced by the assumption that although such glorious times may be perceived to be beyond reach they are not wholly extinct.

Such times however may be recognised as ephemeral, to an extent, as are the lives of the men who move through them. What may be evinced from the Lament of the Rohirrim is that there is a separation of the past from the present – a break in continuity that the Lament may serve tenuously to bridge – a loss of Rohirric attributes and comforts not only in a material context but also in an accompanying residual spiritual balance. Such a displacement of characteristics allows for the realisation in terms of memory rather than actuality. Such nobility and times may only be recovered when there rings forth a voice to answer the Lament of the Rohirrim both by word and deed.

In context

The positioning within the context of *The Lord of the Rings* of the Lament, through its oration by Aragorn, serves to introduce the reader to the Horse Lords of Rohan. Framed by a sea of greensward washing towards Edoras and buttressed by mountains, nonetheless it is a land of plight, barren of the cohesive elements of kingship and order unfolds before the travellers. I would hazard that the Lament of the Rohirrim would

have conveyed to those Horse Lords gathered in audience, not only a renewal and transmission of memory but the questions that form part of the Lament of the Rohirrim may, through the orator, speak to each Horse Lord present in such a manner which compels him to introspectively digest and, in turn, answer each of the respective questions in relation to his own individuality, aspirations, personal status and self-reflection all within the context of peerage and social stresses. Indeed, one can almost discern the orator through the heady air of a crowded longhouse pause deliberately after each strophe; letting the sting of each edged question rest in the wound awhile before slowly withdrawing it.

The Lament of the Rohirrim, I would posit, is a plea to action – a call to arms. While it acknowledges the passage of time the Lament also seeks within its phraseology for a new dawn. As each member of the audience absorbs the words so his or her mind is filled with the sobering realisation that 'Just so, this Middle-earth each and every day declines and decays'.⁹ A fleeting, fragmenting struggle upon the road of life ere folk pass into shade. Yet this passing may not always be forgotten, for the memories of great deeds and courage may linger in word, stone or the rising of earth, thereby enabling a preservation of ideals, of reputation and fame. And expressed in heroic terms, although the warrior may be seen as simply fulfilling an appointed task through mettle and main. Glory will find the hero through his deeds rather than the hero actively seeking glory.

'From dark Dunharrow in the dim morning
with thane and Captain rode Thengil's son:
to Edoras he came, the ancient halls
of the Mark-wardens mist enshrouded;
golden timbers were in gloom mantled.
Farewell he bade to his free people,
hearth and high-seat, and the hallowed places,
were long he had feasted ere the light faded.
Forth rode the king, fear behind him,
fate before him, Fealty kept he;
oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them.
Forth rode Théoden. Five nights and days
east and onward rode the Eorlingas
through Folde and Fenmarch and the Firewood
six thousand spears to Sunlending,
Mundburg the mighty under Mindolluin,
Sea-Kings' city in the South-Kingdom
foe-beleaguered, fire-circled.
Doom drove them on, Darkness took them,
horse and horseman; hoofbeats afar
sank into silence: so the song tells us.'¹⁰

Such stirring prose encapsulates not only the deed but a great conflagration and the atmosphere wherein it unfolded. Here Théoden has left the fear of his fate behind him and accepts that he is riding towards a seemingly inevitable destruction. A journey into the web of fate and the doom of men; all about the creeping dusk threatens to fog such deeds but for the voice of men that may ever carry such tales from one generation to another. Thereby the roots may be driven deep enabling the new shoots to ever strive towards the rising sun:

'Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.

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To hope's end I rode and to heart's breaking;
Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall!'¹¹

To return to the context of the Lament, there is no extinction of its subject matter but that '...they have passed...' such things are perceived not to be beyond recovery as long as their memory survives. The warrior class who defended the borders and thereby maintained a degree of order where-in the society prospered have faded into night until a new dawn which will see their descendants ride forth; 'Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising'. The dawn within the context of the Lament is anticipated, not dismissed. So within the prose one finds not merely the lamentation for better times but a spur to the ragged flanks of dread-night, a last sounding of the horn and a hope for a new day's sun. Such prose retains and relates a corpus of memory in a fashion that celebrates as it mourns, thus preserving as it heralds a passing. Just as the great barrows swelled upon Middle-earth creating a memorial (may I infer sacred?) landscape they were markers denoting an ancestral bloodline which, through spectacle, was intertwined with not only the folk of Rohan but the very land itself. A tradition of claim to inherited land conjoined with the language of an oral tradition

that also captured and conveyed its history.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with Professor Tolkien's final thoughts at his Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford¹² (in which he also included extracts from the Anglo-Saxon prose pieces *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*). Tolkien muses on people and aspects from his past but after recalling those fading faces he '...survey[s] with eye or mind those who may be called my pupils (though rather in the sense 'the apples of my eyes'): those who have taught me much (not least *trawpe*, that is fidelity), who have gone on to a learning to which I have attained; or when I see how many scholars could more than worthily have succeeded me; then I perceive with gladness that the *duguð* has not yet fallen by the wall, and the *dréam* is not yet silenced.'¹³

In a sense the questions posited in the Lament of the Rohirrim may only be answered by those who come after, for it is they who will rein the horse and gather the smoke of a new wood burning. The memory of their forefathers passed to them, and in the retaining providing a social continuity, an important dimension, and one that echoed throughout Middle-earth.

References

1. For prose to survive in the context of oral tradition, whereby it is communicated through oration rather than literary forms, it must have a value cognizant to its audience – a purpose or association to ensure the longevity of its subject matter. A philosophical value, the containment of historical information or possess an association with the poet or an event for example.

2. *The Two Towers*, Tolkien J.R.R., p136-137

3. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Bradley SAJ, page 324

4. The simple definition of a *kenning* implies that, in the basic word, the person or thing to which the poet alludes must be called something which it is not, although it must in some way resemble it. The basic words in kennings for men and women are often words for trees or poles; tree of battle a kenning for warrior for example. See *Scaldic Poetry*: Turville-Petre, p.xlv-p.xlvii

5. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Carpenter, p.172, also p.368

6. *The Two Towers*, p.142

7. *Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, Polomé, p. 85

8. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Carpenter, p. 400

9. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, Bradley SAJ, p. 324

10. *The Return of the King*, p.87

11. *ibid*, p.145

12. *The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien J.R.R., pp. 239-240

13. *ibid*, p.240.

(footnote 7: *duguð*: the noble company (in a king's hall).

dréam: the sound of their glad voices and the music of their feasts.)

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