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Higher Argument: Tolkien and the tradition of Vision, Epic and Prophecy

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Arthur; Blake; creation; divine inspiration; epic; inspiration; Milton; prophecy; Spenser; vision

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Deirdre Greene

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Very few visionary poets can be called classical. That is because visions and revelations occur mostly on the outer limits of a given culture, they belong to the deprived and the unrecognized and to those who cultivate secret wisdom . . . Our own culture rests on reason and on science, our morality is practical and our philosophy is distrustful of visions. If we are still hungry for visions we seek them in the realm of poetry. There, on the outer limits of our culture, we allow them to exist.

(Levi, 1986, p. 27)

Peter Levi's observations on visionary poetry are equally applicable to all visionary writing. Indeed, they easily and usefully transfer to fantastic and mythopoeic literature, which partakes of the visionary impulse. The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien shares much with the poetry Levi describes: it exists on the edges of the literary canon; it ignores or denies value to the empirical precepts of our culture; it defies the pragmatic morality and philosophy on which our culture rests; it is turned to, though often sheepishly or covertly, by a huge readership – hungry for something, not knowing what they seek. I do not hope to explain what Tolkien's readers search for, or why; however, a significant part of what they find is an alternative to the conventional vision of our culture, and, through that vision, access to threads of English literary tradition which weave far back into our cultural history.

Owing to the relatively recent appearance of prose fiction, the tradition of visionary literature is largely a poetic tradition. Therefore, connections between Tolkien and his predecessors in the "line of vision" are necessarily made across kind; for the purposes of this study, the differences between poetry and prose are less important than the similarities that arise in literary expressions of the visionary impulse.

Literary criticism in this century has been inhospitable to

vision, preferring mimesis or empiricism. This representational aesthetic is a recent development in European literary history by comparison with the long tradition of mythic, symbolic, and romantic writing in our culture. It arose with the novel in the eighteenth century. Although the evolution of what would become realism and naturalism ran concurrently with the romantic movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the twentieth century (during the lifetimes of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis) literary taste turned against romanticism in its various forms in favour of empirical literature. Literary practice tended toward recording the truth of sensation and experience, observation of the present, psychological reality, and ordinary human behaviour. In the latter half of the century, however, the "new" critical dogmatism receded before the emergence of a variety of alternative critical approaches and a flexible scholarly attitude to their application; access to slipped threads of the English literary history could be regained.

Of particular interest has been the discernment of a tradition of visionary writing extending from Spenser through Milton (and, in a somewhat different form, Blake) into this century (Wittreich, 1975, p. 98), where it must be seen to include Tolkien. Although Tolkien's best achievements were in prose and the great works of the others were poetic, these writers are united by their narrative mode, their concern with myth and symbol, and their illuminating interior vision. Indeed, Tolkien might be said to have significantly developed the visionary tradition by translating what had been poetic concerns into prose form, and to have developed the tradition of the English novel by injecting it with strains of visionary, romantic and mythic literary practice. While other novelists of this century, not least James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, have written visionary fiction, Tolkien's accomplishment is distinctive and warrants a separate examination.¹

¹ For a study of Tolkien's contribution to the development of the novel through his incorporation of earlier literary practices, see D.M.

The line of visionary poets has its roots, significantly, in Tolkien's scholarly province: in the fourteenth century with Chaucer, Langland, and the *Pearl* poet. Dryden describes this succession in his "Preface to the Fables":

Milton was the poetical son of Spenser . . . Spenser more than once insinuates, that the soul of Chaucer was transfus'd into his body; and that he was begotten by him Two hundred years after his Decease . . . Milton has acknowledg'd to me, that Spenser was his Original. (Dryden, 1963, p. 630)

The line of visionary poets does not end with Milton. Blake in his poem *Milton* claimed that the soul of the dead poet in a beam of light had entered the tarsus of his left foot. Less exotic expressions of admiration for Spenser and Milton were made by other Romantic poets. In this century the tradition of "prophetic" verse is exemplified in the work of W.B. Yeats and David Jones, among others. Although Tolkien made no claims on the souls of his predecessors, he saw himself as inspired, saw his writing as sub-creation under God, and observed that his fiction seemed to come from outside himself. This artistic posture is, of course, neither singular nor new. Whereas for Aristotle the poet was chiefly a "maker" or craftsman, for Plato "all good poets epic as well as lyric compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed" (Plato, 1971, p. 1142). This paper examines the works of Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien (with some reference to Blake) in terms of the operation of a visionary aesthetic and the Platonic understanding of the literary artist as inspired. That is not to say that these are visionary writers in quite the same way or to the same degree. Specifically, they are considered in terms of two elements common to the works of all: the influence of the apocalyptic books of *The Bible*, particularly *Revelation*, and the tension between the epic and the prophetic impulse.

Contrary to the long-standing belief that the most important influence on the epics of Spenser and Milton was the classical poets, more recent scholarship has shown that the influence of the classics was, in fact, secondary to that of the *Bible*, especially the apocalyptic books. Gabriel Harvey, Spenser's teacher and literary intimate, expressed this opinion of *Revelation*: it is "the verie notablest and moste wonderful Propheticall or Poeticall vision" (Wittreich, 1979, p. 8). The nexus of prophecy and poetry was apparent to Milton as well. He writes in "The Reason of Church Government" that the Hebrew prophets surpass the classical poets "in the very critical art of composition" (Milton, 1951, p. 424). In *Paradise Regained* this position is reiterated in the figure of Christ:

All our Law and Story strew'd
With Hymns, our Psalms with artful terms inscrib'd,
Our Hebrew Songs with Harps in *Babylon*,
That pleased so well our Victor's ear, declare
That rather *Greece* these Arts from us deriv'd . . .
(Milton, 1938, p. 393)

While Milton here makes a very doubtful historical claim,

this passage expresses Milton's belief in the artistic primacy of the Hebrews and his regard for *The Bible* as an artistic model. Tolkien's reliance on *The Bible* as a chief source of creative inspiration, then, assumes stylistic as well as thematic significance for discussions of his prose fiction.²

An observation common to criticism of Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien is that their works are remarkably pictorial. This quality suggests the influence of the apocalyptic books of *The Bible*, in which messages are conveyed not through direct statement but through clusters of complex visual symbols. An example from *Revelation* may demonstrate the pitch this visual complexity can reach:

. . . I saw seven lampstands of gold and among them:
One like the Son of Man wearing an ankle-length robe,
with a sash of gold about his breast. The hair of his
head was as white as snow-white wool and his eyes
blazed like fire. His feet gleamed like polished brass
refined in a furnace, and his voice sounded like the roar
of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars.
A sharp, two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and
his face shone like the sun at its brightest.

(*Revelation* 1:12-16)

In terms of ordinary verisimilitude, this passage is simply bizarre. Scripture scholars, however, mining near-forgotten iconographies, dissect such passages to extract their meanings. One may identify at least some of the symbols through the most common conventions of European Christian culture, as conveyed in the literary tradition: gold indicates both purity and sovereignty; white emphasizes purity again; fire suggests spiritual power; a two-edged sword denotes truth; the shining face speaks of divinity. These are but the most accessible elements of the symbolic picture: other meanings may be guessed and a complex exegesis produced.

Allegorical literature of the medieval period imitated this verbal iconography. Peter Levi in his essay on "Visionary Poets" emphasizes the interdependence of allegory and vision in the work of Dante, the "great example of a visionary poet central to European and Christian culture". Levi writes of the surrealistic quality of visionary writing, traceable through the period from John of the Cross to Spenser (Levi, 1986, pp. 31-32). Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in particular is characterised by complex visual descriptions laden with symbolic meaning:

A louely Ladie rode him faire beside,
Vpon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
Vnder a vele, that wimpled was full low,
And ouer all a black stole she did throw,
As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,
And heaueie sat vpon her palfrey slow:
Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
And by her in a line a milke white lamb she lad.
(Spenser, 1980, p. 30)

This depiction of Una is visual and external. Perception of

Greene, 1989, chapters 3 and 5.

² Tolkien's reliance on *The Bible* as a poetic model is addressed in Shippey, 1982, p. 151.

her sadness, for example, is based strictly on her deportment. Nevertheless, careful reading of the iconographic symbols in this portrait allows the reader to make certain moral judgements. She rides a white ass, the colour of which indicates sexual purity as its image evokes the humility of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. Una, the personification of truth, is more white than the ass; truth is thereby shown to be supported by humility, but also to be subtly more fine a virtue. Una's garments clearly indicate modest sobriety. The lamb she leads is another symbol of purity, as well as of Christ's sacrifice. This lamb is commonly associated with St. George in religious art.³ The whole picture, of course, is impossible in terms of nature, but like the images from *Revelation*, some of which it borrows, it is dense with meaning.

Milton is less startling in his deviations from nature, but he too operates outside the bounds of empirical representation:

But see the Virgin blest,
Hath laid her Babe to rest.

Time is our tedious song should here have ending;
Heavn's youngest teemed Star,
Hath fixt her polisht Car,

Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending:
And all about the Courty Stable,

Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable.

(Milton, 1951, p. 315)

The Gospel descriptions of Christ's nativity, the visitation of the angels, and the appearance of the star are combined with images of a court, and more significantly, with the image of a heavenly chariot. This chariot is an evocation of Elijah's miraculous passage from Earth to Heaven. It has some relation also to the classical mythologies which portray the heavenly bodies as chariots of light or fire. This dense fusion of imagistic reference sets Milton, like Spenser, outside the narrowly mimetic practice we have come to know as realism.

Tolkien's images are closer again to primary reality; they are dreamlike, though not simply dreams. In his writings on the mythological First and Second Ages of Arda, the pictures are appropriately fantastic, though they have a blurred or shadowed quality, as if seen through a glass, darkly. Tuor's encounter with Ulmo, the Water god, exemplifies this:

. . . as he went he saw that the sun was sinking low into a great black cloud that came up over the rim of the darkening sea; and it grew cold, and there was a stirring and murmur as of a storm to come. And Tuor stood upon the shore, and the sun was like a smoky fire behind the menace of the sky; and it seemed to him that a great wave rose far off and rolled towards the land, but wonder held him, and he remained there unmoved. And the wave came towards him, and upon it lay a mist of shadow. Then suddenly as it drew near it curled, and broke, and rushed forward in long arms of foam; but where it had broken there stood dark against the rising storm a living shape of great height and majesty.

Then Tuor bowed in reverence, for it seemed to him that he beheld a mighty king. A tall crown he wore like

silver, from which his long hair fell down as foam glimmering in the dusk; and as he cast back the grey mantle that hung about him like a mist, behold! he was clad in a gleaming coat, close-fitted as the mail of a mighty fish, and in a kirtle of deep green that flashed and flickered with sea-fire as he strode slowly towards the land . . . and then for the light of his eyes and for the sound of his deep voice that came as it seemed from the foundations of the world, fear fell upon Tuor and he cast himself down upon the sand.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 28)

This passage exhibits the iconographic features seen in Spenser and Milton: the dark cloud to signal danger, the moving sun to indicate the work of a divinity, the great wave to represent awesome power, a silver crown for sovereignty, shadowy mist for mystery, fire and light for spiritual power, and a mighty voice for prophecy. The dreamlike quality is achieved through the presence of shadows and mists, as well as peculiar grammatical constructions that suggest Tuor is unsure of what he is seeing: "it seemed to him", "A tall crown he wore like silver", and "his long hair fell down as foam". Also, Tuor experiences a common dream terror: transfixed in the face of an overwhelming danger, he cannot turn to run.

In Tolkien's writings about the legendary Third Age, his images retain this complexity of visual structure but become more romantic, less mythopoeic. They are possible in terms of nature, but strange and burdened with symbolic meaning. Frodo's first sight of Goldberry in the house of Tom Bombadil tells the reader a great deal about the woman and, by association, her mate:

They were in a long low room, filled with the light of lamps swinging from the beams of the roof; and on the table of dark polished wood stood many candles, tall and yellow, burning brightly.

In a chair, at the far side of the room facing the outer door, sat a woman. Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of flag-lilies set with the pale-blue eyes of forget-me-nots. About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be enthroned in the midst of a pool.

(Tolkien, 1983a, p. 138)

The dwelling has low roofs, indicating simple humility; it is filled with light, suggesting spiritual good; the furnishings and the candles are of natural materials, connoting rural closeness to nature. Goldberry's chair, far opposite the door, suggests a throne in a reception hall. Her yellow hair suggests innocence and goodness; it is yellow rather than gold, emphasizing her unassuming nature. Her gown associates her with lush, young vegetation. Her belt is the gold of purity and sovereignty, but it celebrates in its floral design the eternal, cyclical triumph of nature. She is encircled by water and flowers, symbols of purity and

³ Hamilton's notes on the iconographic content of *The Faerie Queene* (Spenser, 1980) are copious and enlightening.

fertility. As a whole, the image asserts Goldberry as a queen or a local deity, whose power derives from nature; she is associated with water, morning, and spring, and so belongs to the germinating, birthing, and burgeoning segment of the nature cycle. The reader is left with the impression that her power is so fundamental that there is no need for any display of sovereignty; Goldberry's power is that of earth, water, and warmth. Tolkien has combined the complex symbolism of the elaborate pictorial images of Spenser and Milton with observation of real things found in this world to produce a plausible image of great illustrative significance; again he has taken the effects of older literature and shaped them to more modern literary taste.

This sort of warmth and humanity has been intimately associated with the visionary tradition, a point Levi makes with respect to Dante:

Visionary poetry always has its roots in personal earthly experience . . . The visions that make the best poetry are very often tranquil and serene, like the contemplation of the stars, from which in part they may arise. But in whatever visionary state Dante may have conceived or even composed his final cantos, poetry is a mortal terrestrial thing, and all our languages are earthly and mortal.

(Levi, 1986, p. 33)

The same, of course, may be said of prose. However inspired Tolkien was in his sub-creation, and whatever the lofty themes he expressed, the form he gave them was human and comprehensible – though full of the resonance of more romantic and mythic literary ages.

This pictorial style is closely connected with the search for spiritual enlightenment. It is an attempt to externalize interior vision. The difficulty of this enterprise is clear from the prayer that ends the *Faerie Queene*:

For, all that moueth, doth in *Change* delight:
But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:

O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that
Sabbaoth's sight.

(Spenser, 1980, p. 735)

Likewise, Milton's Samson at the end of his life finds a purpose in suffering and an opportunity provided by God for him to defeat the enemies of Israel. This Biblical story obviously parallels Milton's sense of his own life: sightless and anathematized, he too found opportunity at the close of his life to fulfil the promise of his youth.

Tolkien attempted in two long short stories to articulate his disappointment and his hope of expressing his interior vision. In *Smith of Wootton Major* he suggests that he has been blessed by God with rare insight into the Perilous Realm, a symbol for Tolkien of the spiritual world of archetypes and ideals, but that his penetrating vision has been taken away. This was written at a low ebb in Tolkien's creative life, when he felt that what he had written was flawed or imperfectly conceived and that his creative energies were sapped so he would write no more. He called it "an old man's book, already weighted with the presage of bereavement" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 389). According to Humphrey Carpenter (1978, pp.

133-134), Tolkien was often subject to despair about his writing. A more hopeful and more representative statement of his feelings on the subject is "Leaf by Niggle". Allegorical readings of this story are numerous, equating Niggle with Tolkien, his wonderful imagined tree with the unfinished mythopoeic *Silmarillion*, and his one canvas of a single detailed leaf with *The Lord of the Rings*. Although he characterizes himself as a procrastinating, "niggling", unfulfilled artist, he suggests through Niggle's one perfect leaf that he has fully and clearly expressed at least a small part of his interior vision. "Leaf by Niggle" also intimates Tolkien's resignation to his mortality, expressed as inability to realize in his lifetime his vast sub-created history; as an author Tolkien ultimately rested in the belief that his work partook of the divine Creation.

The question remains, however, to what extent Tolkien, like Milton and Spenser, felt his work to be literally inspired. E.K., writing the argument to the "October" eclogue of *The Shepherdes Calender*, is supposedly faithful to Spenser's own ideas when he asserts that poetry is

. . . no arte, but a diuine gift and heauenly instinct not
to bee gotten by laboure and learning, but adorned with
both: and poured into the witte by a certaine
(enthusiasm) and celestial inspiration . . .

(Spenser, 1912, p. 456)

The poet is not simply a "maker", but a channel for divine communication. As for Milton, the supreme confidence with which he acts as an amanuensis to God is simply startling:

If answerable style I can obtaine
Of my Celestial Patroness, who deignes
Her nightly visitation unimplor'd,
And dictates to me slumbring, or inspires
Easie my unpremeditated verse:
Since first this Subject for Heroic Song
Pleas'd me, long choosing, and beginning late . . .

(Milton, 1951, p. 198)

Milton's lifelong preparation for the writing of some great work is clear, for example, in the opening to "Lycidas". His steadfast commitment to the Christian muse, the Holy Spirit who is said to be the female aspect of the Trinity, indicates an attitude that the true poet, like the true prophet, has an actual vocation from God.

Tolkien's ontological and literary theory of *sub-creation* articulates most completely Tolkien's belief that man's creative impulse derives from his having been made in the image and likeness of the Creator. Further, he stated that true sub-creation, as opposed to realistic representation, involves the making of things that do not occur in God's creation:

. . . we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves
and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into
the belly of the cold worm. But in such "fantasy", as it
is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man
becomes a sub-creator.

(Tolkien, 1983b, p. 122)

Clearly Tolkien held his fiction to be of a higher kind than the realistic fiction that dominated his generation; to some degree he was rebuking writers for their obsession with realism. He felt that he was contributing to the effoliation of

Creation by making things that were possible to God but not actually made by him (Tolkien, 1981, pp. 188-189). By logical association, if inclination and ability to create are given by an omniscient and omnipotent God, then whatever proceeds from that faculty proceeds from God. In this context, Tolkien's attitude to his writings as independent of himself supports the assumption that he saw them as in some way inspired by God. Certainly his view of divine participation in his creative acts is not as exaggerated as that of authors from more innocent, less rationalizing religious ages, yet the sense of inspiration – and of sacrality – remains.

Out of this sense of a writer as spokesman for God – as prophet – Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien all display an angry distrust of the making of heterodox images. In *The Faerie Queene*, Archimago summons spirits out of Hell to delude the Red Cross Knight as he sleeps, giving him dreams of Una's impurity. In *Paradise Regained* Christ rejects the pagan oracles as diabolical:

No more shalt thou by oracling abuse
The Gentiles; henceforth Oracles are ceast . . .
God hath now sent his living Oracle
Into the World, to teach his final will,
And sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell
In pious Hearts, an inward Oracle
To all truth requisite for men to know.
(Milton, 1951, p. 361)

Another important visionary poet, William Blake, distrusts settled religious images altogether, emphasizing the personal nature of such images and the danger of attempting to universalize them:

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy:
Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
Mine has a snub nose like to mine:
Thine is the friend of All Mankind,
Mine speaks in parables to the Blind:
Thine loves the same world that mine hates,
Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates.
(Blake, 1979, p. 748)

Tolkien gives his evil characters the power to create false images in the minds of men, or to cause men to perceive true images in a false structure. Sauron bends the mind of Denethor so that he interprets the visions in the Palantír as signs of the undeniable victory of Mordor (Tolkien, 1983a, pp. 887, 889). Saruman, through the enchantment of his voice, conjures false images of his own character, the roles of his listeners, and his relation with Gandalf:

So great was the power that Saruman exerted in this last effort that none that stood within hearing were unmoved. But now the spell was wholly different. They heard the gentle remonstrance of a kindly king with an erring but much-loved minister. But they were shut out, listening at a door to words not meant for them: ill-mannered children or stupid servants overhearing the elusive discourse of their elders, and wondering how it would affect their lot. Of loftier mould these two were made: reverend and wise. It was inevitable that they

should make alliance. Gandalf would ascend into the tower, to discuss deep things beyond their comprehension in the high chambers of Orthanc. The door would be closed, and they would be left outside, dismissed to await allotted work or punishment. Even in the mind of Théoden the thought took shape, like a shadow of doubt: "He will betray us; he will go – we shall be lost."

Then Gandalf laughed. The fantasy vanished like a puff of smoke.

(Tolkien, 1983a, p. 605)

The quality of Saruman's voice gradually turns into a visual scenario showing Gandalf's betrayal, until the sound of Gandalf's laughter disperses Saruman's unwholesome images. Villains and tempters in the work of Spenser, Milton, Blake, and Tolkien are generally protean figures, who by hypocrisy delude the innocent or ignorant and lead them into sin.

The struggle for vision, clarity, and certitude which characterizes the post-lapsarian worlds of these writers is counterpointed in the psychological landscapes they create. In Spenser, the landscape as well as the characters can have allegorical significance. In Milton and Tolkien, the inner life of the characters is realized in the surrounding landscape. Confusion is rendered as a labyrinth or a forest. Wisdom and virtue have specific loci which have been described as "temples"; these are usually gardens or houses, where the sojourner discovers absolute values (Williams, 1975, p. 31). In this regard one observes the contrast in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* between the Garden of Adonis, an illustration of fruitful sexuality, and the dense forest through which the knights pursue a false ideal of beauty. In *Comus*, Milton's most Spenserian work, the virgin's temptation is illustrated in her wanderings through a dark forest where she is abducted by Comus and held till rescued by her brothers who bring her safe to her father's house. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo's moral confusion is acted out in his blind groping through the Goblin caves of the Misty Mountains; the confusion of the dwarves when deprived of Gandalf's leadership is displayed through their hopeless disorientation in Mirkwood. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits' misadventures in Midgewater and the Old Forest illustrate their struggle toward their destinies as quest heroes; the benighted passage of Frodo and Sam through Cirith Ungol demonstrates their faith and resourcefulness despite ignorance, confusion, and lack of hope. In contrast to these "labyrinths", Bilbo finds refuge in the House of Beorn and in Rivendell, while Frodo and his companions rest in the "temples" of the house of Tom Bombadil, Rivendell, Lothlórien, and Ithilien. It must be observed that there are false "temples", loci of infernal values, such as the Bower of Bliss, Pandemonium, Orthanc, and Orodruin; these must be rejected, escaped, purged, or destroyed. The temple-labyrinth archetype is, of course, common throughout English literature, and we need look no further for examples than to the comedies of Shakespeare or to *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The essence of prophetic writing, however, lies not simply in its representation of man's quest for abiding values; rather

it rests in a spiritual perspective on history (Fletcher, 1971, p. 5). In its debased sense, “*prophet*” is applied to a prognosticator of events. In a more narrowly defined sense (appropriate to these writers who were deeply concerned with words *per se* and with theology) a prophet is one who discerns in history the movements of God, leading to a final revelation. So, with the long genealogies found in Books II and III of *The Faerie Queene*, facts are submerged in myths and symbols which attempt to soften the hard line between the temporal and the eternal. Human history is traced symbolically to its supernatural source:

It told, how first *Prometheus* did create
A man, of many partes from heartes deriued,
And then stole fire from heauen to animate
His worke, for which he was by Ioue deprived
Of life him selfe, and hart-strings of an *Ægle* riued.
(Spenser, 1980, p. 270)

Spenser’s weaving of a mythical lineage for Elizabeth is an attempt to transform English history into a sort of spiritual fable. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton recreates the history of Satan’s rebellion in a long narrative by the archangel Raphael; at the end of the poem another archangel, Michael, grants Adam a vision of the future of man after the expulsion from the Garden. In *The Lord of the Rings*, references are made that tie the events of this legendary (though clearly temporal) history to the primordial, mythological powers of that world. Elrond says, as he tells the Tale of the Ring, “Eärendil was my sire” (Tolkien, 1983a, p. 260), the same Eärendil that we know from Bilbo’s song to be the evening star. This draws mythological time (or eternity) into the temporal world of the War of the Ring.⁴ The reunion of the two branches of the descendants of Eärendil through the wedding of Aragorn and Arwen stands at the beginning of the Fourth Age, our Age, the Age of Men, drawing eternity into primary temporal history. It has been asserted that in Spenser and Milton temporal reality is always viewed in the context of eternity (Wittreich, 1975, pp. 105-106); can this observation extend also to Tolkien? This would, in part, explain his contention that *The Lord of the Rings* is a profoundly Christian work, though it contains no specific religious references (Tolkien, 1981, pp. 172-173).⁵ The grand struggles of heroic figures within history, legendary or real, are significant chiefly in terms of what exists outside time. For Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien, epic is subordinate to prophecy as the temporal is subordinate to the eternal.

Thus, there is in the marriage of epic and prophecy a certain incompatibility. Whereas an epic is the utterance of a given culture in celebration of itself, prophecy, grounded in a providential view of history, reproaches the present age and calls it to repentance (Wittreich, 1975, pp. 105-106). Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien attempted to write great national works, English epics. Yet all three were consciously, if not explicitly, Christian in their writings. Christian values and the *virtu* of heroic narrative are often contradictory; therefore, all three display some discomfort

with epic conventions. For these writers, military victory, the very stuff of national epic, is itself worth little. Observe the particularly unsanguinary Spenserian hero Sir Guyon, who triumphs over his enemy Acrasia by capturing and leading her away. It is difficult to transfer such an attitude to the classical epics and still more to the Northern Sagas; Achilles would not merely bind the hands of Hector, and Kullervo could not restrain his hand from wholesale slaughter. Milton, like Spenser, abjures the standard epic practice in refusing to sing only “of arms and the man”:

Wars, hitherto the only argument
Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
In battles feigned (the better fortitude
Of patience, and heroic martyrdom
Unsung) . . .
(Milton, 1951, p. 198)

Whereas Spenser used physical combat as an allegory for the ongoing struggle of the Christian to overcome sin, Milton expanded this symbol to treat the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Combat in *Paradise Lost* is absolutely spiritual – in that it is conducted by spirits. Even in *Samson Agonistes* physical conflict is only valuable in so far as it shows the workings of providence.

Tolkien effects a curious blend of conventional heroism and Christian values. Although he celebrates the martial skill of his heroes and evokes the “bloody battle-mood” of the Rohirrim with frank admiration, skill at arms is only praised when it is used to defeat evil, non-human characters. Also, such heroic episodes are brief in contrast with his solemn, minutely observed telling of the covert quest of Mount Doom, of the painful endurance of Frodo and the loving, patient loyalty of Sam, who are the central heroes of that expansive work. Theirs is a song of “patience, and heroic martyrdom”. When Frodo engages in physical combat, it is with his dark self, Gollum; their frenzied wrestling at the Cracks of Doom is at once “real” and an external rendering of Frodo’s spiritual conflict over his desire for the Ring. Tolkien’s comment on heroism in “Ofermod” recalls the opening passage of *Paradise Lost*, cited above: “It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving . . .” (Tolkien, 1966, p. 22). Although Tolkien discouraged readings of his work as historical allegory, one must remember that in the First World War Tolkien served in the trenches and that in the Second World War, while he was writing a large part of *The Lord of the Rings*, two of his sons and scores of his former students bore arms. Once again, there is an ideal common to Spenser, Milton, and Tolkien: the refusal to glorify military exploits can be seen as a refusal to glorify, for its own sake, the history of man. In other words, the prophet triumphs over the national author.

Tension between prophecy and epic is seen in the works of all three authors. *The Faerie Queene* is certainly an attempt to write an epic on the matter of England: Gloriana, the

⁴ For a study of Eärendil and how he connects the world of *The Lord of the Rings* with the mythological phase of Arda’s history, see David Harvey, 1985, pp. 94-99.

⁵ For a broad discussion of Christianity in Tolkien’s fiction, see D.M. Greene, 1989, chapter 2.

symbolic centre of the poem, is a representation of Spenser's monarch. The dedicatory sonnets of the work betray a hope that the poet's influential readers will be moved to grant him some advancement. The exploits of Arthur and his fellow English heroes and heroines seem not only the rewriting of traditional tales, but also an expression of the peculiar patriotic ebullience of the reign of Elizabeth. In all this, Spenser the secular and national poet seems at least a match for Spenser the prophet.

Yet the problem is not solved by finding a balance or a simple contrast of values in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's erstwhile epic moves further and further from the celebration of temporal reality in the history of England. His disappointment with Burleigh, or the depredations of the "Blatant Beast", or some brooding sense of his own mortality, edges Spenser toward more otherworldly concerns as the poem progresses:

I well consider all that ye have sayd,
And find that all things stedfastnes doe hate
And changed be: Yet being rightly wayd
They are not changed from their first estate;
But by their change their being do dilate:
And turning to themselues at length againe,
Doe work their owne perfection so by fate:
Then ouer them Change doth not rule and raigne;

But they raigne ouer change, and doe their states
maintaine.

(Spenser, 1980, p. 734)

The Mutability Cantos represent, to some degree, a shift in the focus of the poem from ethical considerations bearing on Christian life in this world to a meditation on the transience of this world in light of the permanence of the next. While it is commonly judged that *The Faerie Queene* is structurally incomplete, thematically it is complete – or rather it can go no further. Spenser comes to a point at which he loses enthusiasm for the temporal order. His original epic intention is no longer viable, and it is subsumed into the religious vision.

Milton, early in his career, decided against writing his own Arthuriad. In doing so he pressed further along the path on which Spenser had begun. Except in certain of his sonnets, Milton was not the nationalistic poet Spenser had been. While the earlier poet could assume to write a national epic, the Puritan Revolution and the subsequent Restoration had deeply divided England; a single vast work could not even hope to give voice to a fragmented national spirit (Kerrigan, 1974, p. 263). *Paradise Lost* could no more pretend to achieve this end than could explicitly Royalist poems such as "Absalom and Achitophel". Milton appears to have sensed the end of that era in which national epic was possible for an English author. Having eschewed temporal power as a theme for his composition, he expresses doubt about his undertaking:

Me, of these
Nor skilled nor studious, higher argument
Remains, sufficient of itself to raise

That name, unless an age too late, or cold
Climate, or years, damp my intended wing
Depressed . . .

(Milton, 1951, p. 198)

It was, in fact, "an age too late" for national poetry. However, in Milton's work this handicap is liberating. In a way that Spenser is not, Milton is free to rebuke his age for losing sight of divine purpose: it must have seemed to many that England had missed an opportunity to build the New Jerusalem. Milton, a political outsider, can adopt the true prophetic role of a voice crying in the wilderness (Kerrigan, 1974, p. 263). In another sense, the poet stands in the place of the archangel Michael, unfolding a vision of the future to the fallen nation:

So shall the world go on,
To good malignant, to evil men benign,
Under her own weight groaning till the day
Appear of respiration to the just
And vengeance to the wicked, at return
Of him so lately promised to thy aid,
The woman's seed – obscurely then foretold,
Now amplier known thy saviour and thy Lord;
Last in the clouds from Heaven to be revealed
In glory of the Father, to dissolve
Satan with his perverted world, then raise
From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined,
New heavens, new Earth, ages of endless date
Founded in righteousness and peace and love,
To bring forth fruits, joy and eternal bliss.

(Milton, 1951, p. 301)

Milton's terrible warning, founded in the social and religious climate of his time and place, becomes a vision of apocalypse and a new Eden.

Although very early in his career Tolkien contemplated and even began work on an Arthuriad (Carpenter, 1978, p. 171) his nationalistic sense that the Arthur cycle was Welsh in origin and appeared in English literature only through French influence spoiled his pleasure in the thing, and he abandoned it. What he most desired was truly English matter to work with – which, if it had ever existed, was long since lost or totally obscured by the cultural upheaval of successive invasions. Therefore he thought to recreate the "true" matter of England, using his philological expertise to do so.

Tolkien constructed a cosmogony and a long mythological history based on residual indications in medieval literature of the ancient beliefs of the people of Britain and on aspects of various European myths and legends which he believed were compatible with English character.⁶ This mythology reflects Christian values and beliefs, so it is to a degree anomalous. The anomaly is compatible, however, with his belief that all myths apprehend some eternal truth (Carpenter, 1978, p. 99), and he held that eternal truth was most completely apprehended by Christianity. In a curious way, his scrupulous avoidance of explicitly Christian reference in his mythology follows Milton's movement in epic away from temporal concerns to eternal questions. In an age of

⁶ T.A. Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth* (1982) is the most enlightening study of Tolkien's reconstruction of his "asterisk mythology".

fragmented world and religious views, Tolkien could not appeal to a fundamental national consensus or body of beliefs; to be heard, his work had to be syncretistic, imaginative, and unifying. Therefore, over decades he constructed his own mythology, seeking internal cohesion and fidelity to what he perceived as eternal truth.

The central work of his *legendarium* focuses on the transitional period between the mythological phase of the history and the earliest beginnings of our recorded history. *The Lord of the Rings* may be read as a prose epic celebrating English history and culture while quietly demonstrating the superior, implicitly Christian, "heroism of obedience and love". Tolkien's own version of the Mutability Cantos is expressed in the "cheerfully sad" speeches of Elrond and Galadriel, who delineate the perennial threat of evil in the fallen world: "I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories"

(Tolkien, 1983a, p. 260); ". . . through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat." (Tolkien, 1983a, p. 376). Though he did not attempt to allegorize the national and international events of his lifetime, Tolkien's implicit argument in *The Lord of the Rings* (indeed in much of his other fiction also) is that power, technological and political, is entangled in the fallen state of the world and is therefore both dangerous and transitory, and that the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love are necessary to man's survival in this world and into the next. The elegiac aspect of the work, mourning the loss of the green countryside, or myth and mystery, or innocence, is equally an admonishing cry to preserve and renew these things. The interlaced structure and its concomitant theme of the governance of providence appeals to the reader to observe the working of God in history. Though Tolkien did not proselytise in his fiction, he seems truly to be a voice crying in the wilderness

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