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Charles E. Noad

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Frodo and his Spectre: Blakean Resonances in Tolkien

Abstract

Comparisons between Blake and Tolkien are tempting, not least because of superficial resemblances, but more valid comparisons can be made in their treatment of similar underlying themes. One such is that shown in the opposition of Los and his Spectre (Blake) and of Frodo and Gollum (Tolkien), where a comparison points up the outlooks and limitations of both writers.

Additional Keywords

William Blake; Frodo; Gollum; Jerusalem; language; Los; mythology; Spectre

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Charles E. Noad

Abstract: Comparisons between Blake and Tolkien are tempting, not least because of superficial resemblances, but more valid comparisons can be made in their treatment of similar underlying themes. One such is that shown in the opposition of Los and his Spectre (Blake) and of Frodo and Gollum (Tolkien), where a comparison points up the outlooks and limitations of both writers.

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I hope I am not doing any great violence to anyone's sense of the appropriate by seeming to yoke together William Blake and J.R.R. Tolkien. That the differences, both in personality and in the kind of work they produced, between the radical Swedenborgian proto-Romantic and the conservative Catholic scholar, were many and profound, scarcely needs to be emphasised, and this ramble through a few instances where their thoughts have parallels of a kind shall not seek to minimise those differences. And let me note here that neither shall I attempt any sort of overall comparison between Blake and Tolkien. Genius is characteristically intensely personal and ultimately incommensurable. Blake and Tolkien had each his own genius; neither could have achieved exactly what the other did.

And yet there are resemblances in certain aspects of their creative work which are at least superficial and which may sometimes point to deeper common concerns. Quite apart from the most general fact that each wrote some peculiar books, both were preoccupied with language and the way in which it affects one's perceptions of the world. To Blake, the English language was the "rough basement" (*Jerusalem* 36:58; Erdman, 1988, p. 183)¹ upon which was erected the symbolic system of the way his compatriots comprehended the world. And, as his idealised self proclaimed:

"I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another
Mans"

(*Jerusalem* 10:20; Erdman, 1988, p. 153)

A good deal of Blake's writing could be described as an attempt to make the reader rub up against the net of language which binds his perceptions, and so perhaps to help wake him from the single vision of Newtonian sleep. His purpose was not so much to create his own system, as to "Strive[e] with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems" (*Jerusalem* 11:5; Erdman, 1988, p. 154).

Tolkien's attitude to language was different. If Blake, once

he had come to perceive the part that language plays in moulding our perception of the world, was in a constant struggle against it, then Tolkien was enamoured of it, having been fascinated by it from the earliest age, and, not least because of his technical competence in that field, was able to adopt a far more positive view of it than Blake was ever able to attain. I have no doubt that Tolkien was aware of the way that language can mould thought, but he expressed this awareness by actually inventing languages other than his own, and by exploring the concept of each person having his own unique "native language" which perfectly expressed his linguistic sensibilities; a perfect system to be created, perhaps. Thus, in this instance, they have a common concern, but they approach it with markedly different attitudes.

They are also concerned with, and make use of, the form of myth. In the modern world we don't have myths, at least not myths in the sense in which we consider the ancient world to have had them. True, in the most general sense, a myth can simply mean a widespread belief about some important aspect of humanity or of the universe at large or of the relationship between them. But "myth" has rather more specific meanings to us in that it can refer to form as well as to content. A nature-myth can sum up an antique culture's beliefs about seed-time and harvest, about thunder and lightning; but the modern eye is more likely to be held by the narratives about the gods and goddesses, about the superhuman, and sometimes subhuman (if that is a real distinction), personalities who embody or control such phenomena. In the ancient mind there may have been no easy distinction between the form and the content, between the gods and the thunder; but this distinction is what most strikes us, and we consequently associate myth with the accounts of the superhuman beings, and not with the phenomena it seeks to explain. This distinction is characteristic of the modern world, and the functions which

¹ References to Blake's writings in the text take the form (plate number):(line number), followed by a page reference to the standard scholarly Blake text (Erdman, 1988). Thus "*Jerusalem* 36:58; Erdman, 1988, p. 183" refers to plate 36, line 58 of *Jerusalem*, which can be found on page 183 of the Erdman edition.

myth once performed have separated into science and storytelling.

Yet, if we no longer explain the World in terms of superhuman personalities (excepting those who would hold that one Great Personality underlies all things), accounts of such beings may still have a function in the modern world. If they can no longer be used to describe those aspects of existence amenable to scientific endeavour, perhaps they can be used to explore, if not to explain, other things which are not easily – if at all – quantifiable, indeed to “say things which cannot be said in any other way.”

In that sense, then, two of the foremost modern mythologisers are William Blake and J.R.R. Tolkien. The “Prophetic Books” of the former are crowded with the actions and the speeches of the strange persons, at once both superhuman and human, which he uses to expound his concerns about the human soul and its perceptions of the world, and which might very loosely be termed “emblematic personages”. However, we should note that it was not Blake’s purpose to create a pseudo-mythology. To Blake, “All deities reside in the human breast” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 11; Erdman, 1988, p. 38), and if he found himself writing of persons who seem to perform actions in a mythic dimension, then that was because that was the only way he could express his ideas.

Tolkien’s invented mythology was partly a conscious attempt at one time to create a kind of homegrown grand mythology for his native country – which was perhaps, in a way, also Blake’s purpose in his Prophetic Books – and partly a way of creating a world in which his invented languages could undergo complex historical evolutions; but it was also a way of expressing some very profound things which he could not do in any other way. This is of course a very large subject which would require another conference in itself, and I hesitate to provide any kind of sound-bite definition. I shall just limit myself here to suggesting that the world which Tolkien made for his mythology is very much bound up with the languages for which it was meant to provide a background; that that world is in a sense a manifestation of the linguistic preferences which underlie it, in the same way – I suppose that this was a metaphor of which Tolkien was conscious – that the material world is a manifestation of the Music of the Ainur. His personal linguistic preferences resulted in his creating a world, or system, nearer to his heart’s desire.

So much for a glance at language and myth and how they were used by Blake and by Tolkien. And yet, any attempt to summarize Blake must give anyone who has actually read him all the way through a moment’s pause, at the least. A moment ago I attempted to summarize Blake’s mythology in terms of “emblematic personages”. While it is (probably) not untrue to describe it thus, it scarcely touches the surface; the attempt is absurd. Blake’s work is complex indeed, to put it very mildly, and I shall not attempt at all to exhaust that complexity, even supposing I were capable of doing so. Even if the claim could be advanced that Blake’s work was well-understood, any one-sentence summary would have to be so generalized as to be meaningless. This is not to belittle the

researches that have been made into his writings, but can we really say we understand Blake? Not so very long ago, a prominent Blake scholar declared:

. . . compared to what we know about [Byron’s] *Don Juan*, we know nothing whatever about [Blake’s] *Jerusalem*. When I read an article about *The Four Zoas*, I end up feeling like a sensationalist whose special form of self-abuse is the shock that comes from moving off the cool, stable surfaces of scholarly explanations into the molten grid of the work that needs explaining . . . But I refuse to pretend to believe that even the wisest of Blake scholars feel confident in their understanding of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, much less the strange poems in the Pickering manuscript, and less still *Europe*, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, or *Jerusalem*. (Eaves, 1982, p. 389)

Well, I shall not really be attempting to describe Blake’s myth, and even if I sometimes seem to, it will be more a form of hand-waving in the hope that the general direction will be sensed, rather than a carefully printed signpost.

It isn’t too difficult to draw attention to parallels between details of the myths of Blake and Tolkien. There is the structural aspect. It would take little effort, for example, to “map” Blake’s “Four Zoas” and their emanations (of which more anon) onto certain of the Great Valar, male and female. They both seem to form sets of Jungian quaternaries. If we use the elements with which they are associated, then we get: Fire – Luvah and Melkor; Air – Urizen and Manwë; Water – Tharmas and Ulmo; Earth – Urthona and Aulë. Geographically, Blake’s Eden, Beulah, Generation and Ulro could be equated with Valinor, Eressëa, Middle-earth and Mordor: all, in one sense, different states of being. But such comparisons are, I think, of little real significance: myths have to have some sort of structure, and the fourfold structure has its own appeal and will do as well as any.

Of possibly greater significance are a few of the names. To Tolkien, “Vala” and “Orc” are the names of types of creature; to Blake, they are the names of individuals, Vala having the function of being (again, very roughly) the alluring, visible Nature which we see in ordinary waking consciousness, or “Newtonian sleep”. Orc is the spirit of revolution. He features strongly in Blake’s “prophecies”, as his non-lyrical poems came to be called, of the revolutionary last decades of the eighteenth century, but he had faded to little more than a name by the time we reach *Jerusalem*, well into the nineteenth. The two Orcs have been discussed elsewhere, by Randel Helms (1970, pp. 31-5). (Oddly enough, Orc is the manifestation in the material world of Luvah, the Zoa corresponding to Melkor; but that is just happenstance.) To Blake, “Tiriël” was the King of the Western Plains in the early, heavily allegorical poem of that name; to Tolkien, “Fíriel” was the mortal maiden who is denied passage to the western lands in “The Last Ship.”

Why Blake chose the names he did has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly exploration. Certainly they were not derived from an imaginary language or languages, but rather seem to have been coined for the occasion, sometimes almost by accident. For example, the name “Urizen”, the “Zoa” of

reason, and so of laws and of oppressive political and religious orthodoxy, could well have been inspired in part by the phrase “or reason”, as in: “Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.” This is a pretty typical passage from the early *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Whatever their origins, and however they are pronounced, Blake could invent beautiful, if sometimes grotesque, names; for example: Palamabron, Urthona, Myratana, Enitharmon, Luvah, Urizen, Golgonooza, Dranthon, Ahania, Tharmas, Entuthon Benyhton, Palamabron, Ulro. A few of the names in his earlier prophecies were, as it happens, derived fairly directly from someone who might just about be called a proto-fantastist, though whether he could be regarded as any kind of literary ancestor of Tolkien I shall leave to other minds to decide. For instance, “Oothoon” in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* almost certainly comes from the heroine “Oithona” in the tale of that name by James Macpherson, who published that and much else as the authentic works of the ancient Scottish bard “Ossian”. The poems of “Ossian”, as translated by Macpherson, although subject to doubts about their authenticity from the likes of Macpherson’s contemporary, Samuel Johnson, nevertheless enjoyed an extraordinary popularity throughout Britain and Europe, even Goethe joining in the praises, as well as, very likely, the young Blake; certainly he always professed a belief in their authenticity. Perhaps “Ossian’s” popularity goes to show that there has always been some sort of thirst in modern society for writing of a fantastical nature. However, since I personally find “Ossian” virtually unreadable, I shall not use him to try to prove that particular point. I certainly do not think that “Ossian”/Macpherson had the slightest direct influence on Tolkien.

Of much greater significance are those aspects of Blake’s and Tolkien’s myths not where they have a surface resemblance, but where they are used to explore the same kind of underlying truth. In one of those fascinating sections where Tolkien, with unique and unquestionable authority, discusses “what might have been” had *The Lord of the Rings* taken a different turn, he considers what would have happened had Gandalf taken the Ring and fallen to its temptation: “Gandalf as Ring-Lord would have been far worse than Sauron. He would have remained ‘righteous’, but self-righteous. He would have continued to rule and order things for ‘good’, and the benefit of his subjects according to his wisdom (which was and would have remained great).” It is this cycle of history which Blake was so concerned that we should break out of, where revolutionary ardour, once it has triumphed, apes the tyranny it has overthrown, where Orc has in effect become Urizen. Any Blakean reading the foregoing description of a Gandalf fallen to the Ring will instantly recognise Urizen. Take a look at the last plate of *The Book of Urizen*. There’s Gandalf, Gandalf corrupted that is, glaring out at the reader.

As regards the subject of this paper’s title, I should emphasise that I shall be dealing with just a part of Blake’s myth, and then only with an aspect of that part. Blake saw

Man as a fourfold being, comprising the power of reason, the imagination, the emotions, and the body. In the beginning, these were simply aspects of a single, harmonious whole. But since the Fall they have become separated and no longer work in harmony one with another. On a superhuman scale, these aspects are the Four Zoas: Urizen, Urthona, Luvah, and Tharmas, who are the disunited parts of the Eternal Man, sometimes called Albion, a kind of collective person representing either England or the whole human race. But on the scale of the divided individual – even if that individual is one of the Zoas themselves – the division is slightly different in kind. This too comprises a fourfold scheme, in which a person consists of the Emanation, the Humanity, the Spectre and the Shadow. However, Blake paid much more attention to the Emanation and the Spectre, which he appeared to consider much more important, or at least more interesting, than the others. There is no direct correspondence as such with the fourfold Zoas, although the Spectre seems most associated with the reasoning power.

The Emanation represents, according to one critic, the “total form of all the things a man loves and creates” (Frye, 1947, p. 73). But when separated, it can be a source of torment as well as inspiration. It is characteristically female, and it is the counterpart of the male spectre.

The spectre – what is a spectre? I suppose spectres need some description nowadays. Insofar as the spectre is a separated part of the human unity it might be said to represent that unity when viewed from the outside and considered as an object, especially as an object for the calculating, reasoning power to work on: in a sense, humanity reflected in a mirror and viewed as an object – a selfhood. This is a rather reflexive definition, but you find yourself doing that with Blake. In a way, the spectre is like a kind of *döppelgänger*. This separated selfhood is an indication of the absence of individual unity or integration.

And in order to gain the desired unity, the spectre must be put off:

Each man is in Spectre’s power

Until the arrival of that hour,

When his Humanity awake

And cast his Spectre into the Lake

(*Jerusalem* 37:32-5; Erdman, 1988, pp. 184, 810)

The Negation is the Spectre; the Reasoning Power in Man

This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated
always

To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination.

(*Milton* 40:34-7; Erdman, 1988, p. 142)

But given that it exists, the spectre has its uses, principally to assist in its own annihilation. In a world of fallen humanity, there will indeed be a spectre in each individual; and on the quasi-allegorical level at which the “action” of the Prophetic Books takes place, the Spectre can be made to work for the redemption of the Eternal Man. *Jerusalem* is concerned with this theme, the recovery of Paradise. In this poem (again, greatly to oversimplify), Los, the spirit of Poetic Inspiration, who is himself the manifestation in time

of Urthona, the Zoa of the Imagination, compels his Spectre to assist him in his work of "building Golgonooza / Compelling his Spectre to labours mighty; trembling in fear / The Spectre weeps, but Los unmoved by tears or threats remains" (*Jerusalem* 10:17-19; Erdman, 1988, p. 153). The initial products of Los's spectre-assisted labours at his furnaces are the Spaces of Erin and the city of Golgonooza, which seem to represent the purity of the body and the city of art, respectively, both concepts necessary for the salvation of the fallen Albion. It is of course no coincidence that the poet, Blake, sees poetry as essential for the saving of Albion, and that it is Los, the very Genius of the poetic spirit, who carries out this work in the poem. The relationship of Los and his Spectre can be found in Blake's own life in that, not too surprisingly, it reflects impulses within Blake himself: Los is the part of him that wants to write poetry, to print his "illuminated" books, to open the worlds of Eternity to his fellow men, but the Spectre is the more mundane, cynical, self-centred, watch-the-expenses part of him, which makes him keep his nose to the grindstone of the immediate, material world; perhaps even a necessity in a fallen world, but he still must not be allowed to gain the upper hand. (Does this remind anyone of Barfield's "Burgeon" and "Burden"?)

Blake is quite explicit on the matter in a letter of late 1804 to his sometime patron, the otherwise now completely forgotten minor Augustan poet, William Hayley: "For now! O Glory! and O Delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous Fiend to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life . . . he is become my servant who domineered over me, he is even as a brother who was my enemy" (Erdman, 1988, pp. 756-7). This spiritual release was occasioned by a visit to a new art gallery which displayed copies of several hundred old masters, causing him to escape from the shadow of classicism in art and to re-experience and regain the artistic perceptions of his youth.

The point here is that Blake saw some aspects of his mythology in very personal terms, in particular he was able to see the Spectre as a part of himself which needed to be struggled against unceasingly. The "spectrous Fiend" was what he himself could easily become were he to give up his calling and cease to be a true poet. The ferocity of this struggle is reflected in that between Los and his Spectre in *Jerusalem*. The former threatens the latter with all manner of harm:

I know thy deceit & thy revenges, and unless thou desist

I will certainly create an eternal Hell for thee. Listen!
Be attentive! be obedient! Lo the Furnaces are ready to receive thee.

I will break thee into shivers! & melt thee in the furnaces of death;

I will cast thee into forms of abhorrence & torment if thou

Desist not from thine own will, & obey not my stern command!

(*Jerusalem* 8:7-12; Erdman, 1988, p. 151)

Los cries, Obey my voice & never deviate from my

will

And I will be merciful to thee . . .

If thou refuse, thy present torments will seem southern breezes

To what thou shalt endure if thou obey not my great will.

(*Jerusalem* 10:29-36; Erdman, 1988, p. 153)

Now it might cogently be argued that this kind of thing should not be interpreted in human terms. We are dealing not with human beings but with abstractions, with symbols; and in any case, his spectre is a part of Los himself. This is largely true, but whatever else Blake's characters are or symbolize, they are still presented in human form: they do not speak as bloodless symbols. And although in other parts of his works, the symbolic aspect is indeed very apparent, and we need not suppose for a moment that Blake is describing the actions and situations of ordinary human beings, when we come to Los and his Spectre we really have got a human situation, an interaction – a series of dialogues – between two persons. One of these persons is the Poetic Genius, the good guy, and the other is his total negation, the bad guy. And the good guy, because he knows he is fighting for a good cause, in effect the salvation of the world, uses any means necessary to pursue that cause, including threatening the bad guy with infinitely dreadful punishments.

This might make some of us uneasy. Certainly it makes one wonder about Blake. He indeed saw Pity as an attribute of the divine, but one cannot help but feel that he understood it as something to be indulged in only after victory of a sort had been achieved. Possibly this is to misjudge Blake. As I noted earlier, any claim really to understand him must be regarded as dubious. In the present case, it could very well be that Los is himself far from perfect, and that perfection and pity are both bound up with the result of the work he forces his Spectre to achieve.

So to sum up, Blake saw the Spectre as a divided part of the self, but one which in a fallen world could be ruthlessly bullied into serving the Imagination and redeeming the individual through Art.

Gollum first entered Tolkien's writings as a minor character in *The Hobbit*. Originally he seems to have been no more than a kind of bogeyman, something of a Mewlip, perhaps; but if so a rather hobbitified Mewlip: he does not seem to be greatly different from Bilbo in size, and he knows the ancient and venerable Riddle Game. It is even implied that he was himself hobbitlike – ". . . ages before, when he lived with his grandmother in a hole in a bank by a river" (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 86) – but when Bilbo meets him he is the very opposite of the bucolic normality of a hobbit, and someone the sooner got away from the better.

It was when he began to work on the sequel to *The Hobbit* that Tolkien began to explore who Gollum really was. He was obviously intimately connected with the main link between the books, the magic ring of invisibility which Bilbo had obtained from him in the course of their brief acquaintance. And Frodo's initial impressions of Gollum come of course entirely through Bilbo's eyes: he wonders why Bilbo didn't kill such a loathsome creature at the time,

and so prevent all the trouble, which Gandalf has just been telling him about, that he has caused since. Gandalf has to remind him that Pity stayed his hand at the time, and implies that Pity, far from being a luxury one can have when it costs its giver nothing, is bound up with the fate of the Ring. Besides, to kill without Pity would have been the first step to making Bilbo into another little Gollum himself.

Frodo (as well as the reader) learns a good deal more about Gollum after he intercepts Frodo and Sam at the edge of the Emyrn Muil. It might have been thought expedient to kill Gollum there and then, but Frodo has grown somewhat: they can't kill him outright, "not as things are." But Gollum is also preserved for another reason than Pity: he knows the way into Mordor. And since getting into Mordor by a secret way is fundamental to the task of destroying the One Ring, Gollum's assistance is essential. In fact, since the salvation of the world now depends on it, it must, if necessary, be compelled.

This is a paradoxical situation: Frodo, steadfastly resisting the ever-present lure of the Ring, compelling another hobbit, one who long ago gave himself entirely over to that lure, to guide him to the Ring's destruction. Perhaps Gollum's presence made it easier for Frodo to resist the Ring, as he was able constantly to see in front of him exactly what he would become were he to give in to it. Their positions regarding the Ring formed a kind of symmetry: the real Frodo making a potential Frodo, his own possible self – his Spectre – guide him. And sometimes Gollum had to be forced to his task: "In the last need, Sméagol, I should put on the Precious; and the Precious mastered you long ago. If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire. And such would be my command. So have a care, Sméagol!" (Tolkien, 1966b, p. 248).

Thus, there is this parallel between Blake and Tolkien: Frodo, like Los, has to threaten a person who is his *alter ego* to help him in his work for the salvation of the world. But, even allowing for the fact that Frodo and Gollum are set within a realistic situation and Los and his Spectre aren't, there are some significant differences in the matter. We do not doubt that Los means exactly what he says; but we doubt if Frodo does. He has to utter dire threats against Gollum which the latter will believe; but the reader has room to doubt whether Frodo would ever carry out his threats. Apart from the fact that Frodo would lose his only guide into Mordor, we have by now read enough to understand that in

Tolkien's world the side of good must be consistently good: coercion and force, although sometimes necessary, must be kept to the minimum; free will must be truly free; pity is bound up with ultimate victory.

This is a real difference, and does not merely hinge upon an interpretation of necessity. Tolkien's world was one where, ultimately, good would finally prevail, even if evil had its temporary, if insufferable, triumphs. But Blake's world seems to have been one where, at least in limited areas, evil really could triumph for ever. In the former, using evil to fight evil merely postponed the final victory; in the latter, salvation was uncertain and so anything necessary had to be done to achieve victory.

In the end, this difference seems to resolve itself into a difference of faith: having faith in the ultimate victory of good allows that good to be fully integrated into the means of its triumph; but if you do not have that faith, then the best you can hope for is a not too tarnished victory. Tolkien, though sometimes pessimistic and full of doubts, had that faith; Blake, although he hoped that the Fall could one day be reversed in the World, in the end, I think, lacked it.

To sum up, we have seen that there are some superficial resemblances between the invented mythologies of Blake and Tolkien, and that there are some parallels, some resonances, which are much more significant, where their use of aspects of their myths allows them to explore common concerns, even if they come to differing conclusions. Even so, I do not think that Tolkien was actually influenced by Blake in any way. He undoubtedly knew of Blake, even if no more than someone that should be "read" as part of one's basic "Eng. Lit." background. Even so, Blake's reputation did not stand very high when Tolkien began his academic career in the early 1920s, and his subsequent professional activities would not have involved him having to read anyone so modern as Blake. Others of the "Inklings", including Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis, had some appreciation of the poet, so Tolkien may well have picked up some points on the subject from them, but I do not know of any particular ideas that impressed themselves upon Tolkien.

Since the essence of myth, ancient or modern, "real" or invented, is to say something about matters of universal concern, it is hardly surprising that Blake and Tolkien should sometimes run on parallel lines. And perhaps it is this very concern with matters of real importance which distinguishes the true maker of myths from the mere inventor.

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