The Fall from Grace – Decline and Fall in Middle-earth: Metaphors for Nordic and Christian theology in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*

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Metaphors of the Fall abound at all levels in Tolkien's major works, the two most obvious examples being the history of the Silmarils and the downfall of Númenor. In the latter, Sauron is straightforwardly the Serpent, offering the hope and temptation of immortality, and his intermediary, or agent, is the King Ar-Pharazôn. For those of the Númenóreans that fail, their reward is death. For those that are partially redeemed, by virtue of their eventual but not immediate rejection of Sauron, the reward is departure from Eden (Númenor, the home prepared for the Edain), decline, sundering from the Elves (loss of the state of Grace) and ultimately absorption by lesser men. In the case of the Silmarils the story follows more closely the biblical account. Valinor of course is Eden. The Silmarils, now in the crown of Melkor, are the great temptation and Fëanor is Melkor's unwitting agent. Those of the Elves that succumb depart from Eden, and from the state of Grace inherent in their contact with the Valar and possession of the Silmarils, to face a long punishment of gradual decline, dreadful suffering and ultimate defeat, punctuated by the hope engendered by occasional success. But by virtue of their courage, and hopeless but unfailing hostility to Melkor they win final redemption after the intercession of the gods. In this interpretation the Elves represent man before the Fall – noble, immortal, the natural inhabitants of Eden. The loss of the Silmarils is the loss of the state of Grace, while the determination to recover them becomes, like Man's endeavours, corrupted by the temptations that *mortal* flesh is heir to. And as the Elves embark on their inevitable long struggle, and fade away, man continues to decline, in stature, in longevity, in concentration of purpose, while maintaining somehow his sense of a worthy ethical system.

These are examples on the great scale, and are necessarily aligned closely to the general pattern of the great themes. As we look more and more closely at the detail the magnitude of events decreases and the pattern becomes correspondingly complex, as does the metaphorical content. On the intermediate scale metaphors for the Fall still exist but now they are mingled with other themes – tribal rivalries, social customs, conflicting moralities, the rise of nations and great families, the interactions of men with natural forces. On an individual scale they are all but disappear among the vast range of personal concerns, but still an example or two can be found. It is this delicate touch with the balancing of background detail that has distinguished Tolkien's work in the eyes of so many commentators. But it is important here to distinguish between metaphor and allegory. The purpose of allegory is commentary or analysis, and the structure tends to dominate the thesis. The purpose of metaphor is illustration, consequently the structure is subtle.

Thus on an intermediate scale we find Sauron tempting the Elves with Rings of Power, and causing much destruction thereby, but because they do not wholly succumb the Elves are allowed a partial redemption – mainly in the existence of their long standing strongholds, in particular Lothlórien and Rivendell where the Three Rings not tainted by Sauron are therefore not the agent of his temptation and allowed to do their work.

On an individual level three apparent examples stand out: Boromir, Frodo and Beren. There are many other examples of temptation to be found, but they lack important elements of the proper myth, namely failure, loss of Grace, regeneration, and redemption or death (i.e. mortality). But Boromir's temptation is the genuine article. Having fallen to the lure of the Ring, he redeems himself by an act of selfless heroism and so goes to a hero's death. It lends force to this analysis that the metaphor may have been deliberately contrived. There is no compelling motive of drama or narrative to account for either his heroism or the opportunity for it (he needs merely to have seen the orcs carry off Merry and Pippin alive) although undoubtably the story is more comfortable that way.

Beren's case is more subtle. His temptation is love, his sin pride; he is cast out of Doriath and finds his redemption hi heroism and suffering, final going to a second death after a period that demonstrates his return to a state of Grace. Again, it was *dramatically* unnecessary for Beren and Lúthien's reward to be death – it's necessity lies in the completion of a parable.

Although temptingly familiar, Frodo's case is crucially different, containing as it does imagery of a greater theme, namely the primacy of Fate. This is discussed below.

The importance of multi-layering the metaphorical structure lies in the necessities of sub-creation. The author creates in the mind of the reader one element of a pervasive emotional and factual background that is utterly convincing – not especially because of its inherent plausibility but because it has been so quietly placed among the rest of the mental furniture that one feels that it was always there, and trusts it implicitly. It is a commonplace that good writers (and effective politicians) know how to create familiarity and therefore plausibility by touching on the scintilla of tiny fragments of ideas and forgotten half truths that clutter our brains: it requires a greater art to sneak around and place the idea there just before you put your hand on it, so that you think it is already yours.

The choice of metaphor hints at an attempt to cast light on some of the big theological questions – reconciliation of the Christian and Nordic myths, the concept of individual free will in a structured universe, the theological significance of gender, the origin of Man's inner demons and the meaning of his never-ending struggle against them. All these are inextricably bound up with the idea of fallen man and his permanent conflict with regenerative evil.

Christian or Nordic myth?

It has long been the accepted view that Tolkien's works are based on a Nordic scheme of mythology rather than a Christian, but the creation myth of the Fall, an essential element of western monotheism, predates both. The Eden myth has long been debunked by science, while in terms of everyday lives and experience the gender myth (that is, the association of each gender with characteristics exclusively its own) in particular falls apart as soon as it is examined closely; but the peculiar persistence of these myths in the human consciousness is suggestive of an enduring power, perhaps the recognition of an underlying truth embedded in the nature of existence. That Tolkien thought so – or at least considered it a valid argument – is evident from his writings. Rejecting the contemporary critic Edmund Wilson's dismissal of *The Lord of the Rings* as a simple confrontation, devoid of greater meaning, Spacks (1968, p. 82) asserts that

> ... the force and complexity of its moral and theological scheme provides the fundamental power of *The Lord of the Rings*.
>
> For this scheme there are no explicitly supernatural sanctions; *The Lord of the Rings* is by no means a Christian work.

That the she then spoils this theory somewhat by giving away many examples that show similarities between the Christian and *The Lord of the Rings* theological structure in now way diminishes the force of her evidence.

But "*The Lord of the Rings* is by no means **wholly** a Christian work" would have been more accurate. It is redolent with Christian themes, or at least themes upon which Christian theology is based, or which have much in common with these themes.

Is the Adam and Eve story not a vital myth of that sort? Vital, that is, to an understanding of Christian theology? Humankind fails, is cast out

of Eden, that is to say falls from Grace to an imperfect state, and is doomed to endless struggle to regain it.

The archetypal Christian fable hinges on the battle between the soul and its adversaries, a battle in which the soul may not finally triumph until the afterlife. Northern mythology takes a darker view – that the struggle between man and monster must end in man's defeat, yet he continues to struggle; his weapons are the Hobbit weapons – naked will and courage. Tolkien's works are imbued, saturated even, with the sense of this ultimately hopeless struggle, summed up in the phrase 'the long defeat', which is the very doom Man brings upon himself by his failure to resist the temptation of the serpent, and his redemption lies also within himself, in his capacity for endless courage: and this fortitude gains its longevity from death and rebirth – the ability of mankind to renew its courage with each new generation. Shippey (1982, pp.61-2, 91) refers to this 'theory of courage' and the difficulty it produces for a Christian such as Tolkien when he says that the Northern mythology asks more of men than Christianity, because it offers no easy reward of heaven, no salvation except the satisfaction of having done what is right.

Certainly Tolkien thought much about the theory of courage and its place in an essentially Christian theology and made it a central theme of '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics' (1983, p. 21).

> Man alien in a brutal world, engaged in a struggle that he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured ... that his courage, noble in itself, is also the highest loyalty ...

Beowulf's victory over the dragon is not hinted at as a victory to end wars. It was a great deed, indeed a transcendental deed, but it was Beowulf's, and his triumph and his death alone.

Tolkien, says Shippey (1982, p. 117-8), wanted his characters to live up to the same high standard. He was careful to remove easy hope from them, even to make them conscious of long term defeat. But the mainspring of the theory of courage Tolkien admired was despair, rather than faith and hope, and its spirited often heathen ferocity. "Tolkien," says Shippey (1982, p. 119)

> admired the aesthetic impulse towards good beneath pride and sorrow. In Middle-earth he wanted a similar ultimate courage undiluted by confidence, but at the same time untainted by rage and despair. One may say that the wise characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are often without hope ... but they do not succumb.

Shippey suggests that Tolkien attempted a resolution by inventing a new image for ultimate bravery, centred on the (Hobbit like) characteristics of laughter, cheerful refusal to look into the future at all.

And although in Middle-earth the good side does win, it doesn't do so without great loss, a pattern closely resembling Nordic mythology. The Aesir (Norse gods) tolerated the evil god Loki in their midst, even following his advice, and got into difficulties thereby, only extricating themselves at the price of their virtue, or peace. Too late they banished him to Earth.. He robbed them of their dearest possession, Baldr the Good, (cf. Lúthien). Weakened they were less prepared for the Final Battle on the field of Vigrid, when the earth was consumed by fire at the hand of the evil giant Surtr with his flaming sword. The incinerated earth was swallowed by the great sea, the gods and the giants all perished. But Goodness could arise again. The earth, cleaned by the sea, eventually rose whole again, and a new generation of gods lead by Thor's sons Magne and Modi also rose.

If one chooses to interpret the monsters as presentations of man's internal struggles against his own nature, a reconciliation of the two mythologies might be contrived. But if one retains the scheme containing truly external monsters, the existence of a separate and wilful Satan, one touches on a conundrum at the very heart of Christian theology, a problem dealt with more convincingly, with its dragons and monsters, in the Northern myths.

But behind the courage there is the 'naked will' referred to by Spacks. Free will in this setting means the will to fight on, to choose the Good regardless of outcomes (not the ability to control those outcomes as it is commonly and mistakenly portrayed) and here is the resolution of the conflict of ideas, inherent to Christian theology, between the plausibility of free will in a context where the outcome (i.e. the triumph of

good) is already predestined and must somehow be managed from above despite Man's failures. "The Northern Gods", says Tolkien (1983, p. 21), quoting Ker,

> have an exultant extravagance in their warfare which makes them more like Titans than Olympians; ... only they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins; but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.

This is absolutely central to Tolkien's thought. The origin may be Nordic, but the sentiments are Christian.

Christian teaching is essentially optimistic – that Man reaches by his own endeavours a higher state and eventual salvation. The pessimism inherent in endless cycles of defeat and retrogression, the gradual slipping backwards, is a vision of systemic suffering, a scheme in which Satan's function has become that more limited one of endlessly tormenting man so that man might prove himself; not by virtue of his defeat of evil – except in the most individual sense – but by having engaged the demon continually in conflict, not losing faith despite endless defeats.

It is impossible to separate the operation of free will from such a theological scheme. With Gandalf's discussion with Frodo on the nature of the Ring early in *The Lord of the Rings* we are shown the first of many references to the two apparently opposing themes of Free Will and Order (as opposed to Chance) in the universe, the operations of an ordered Fate. With each defeat, says Gandalf, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again. "I wish it need not have happened in my time," says Frodo. "So do I," says Gandalf, "but all we have to decide is what to do with the times given us". Thus we are introduced to the importance of regeneration; and the necessity of free decision is asserted. A little later a third theme is introduced – that of order in the universe, as, commenting on Bilbo's finding of the Ring, Gandalf tells us his belief that "there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring maker". He would no more strongly have expressed a Christian motif if he had said "God moves in mysterious ways".

Christian theology suggests that essentially we are on our own, except that by prayer we may gain intercession from God, but that ultimate victory for Good is assured. But Tolkien constantly reiterates the contrasting notion of free will – or at least the almost identical one of individual responsibility for the fate of the world. The Elves meet Frodo, and recognise the significance of the meeting; Strider tells Butterbur to do what he can, however small; Frodo accepts responsibility for his burden and the great folk around him – Gandalf, Strider, Galadriel, Faramir – do not attempt to relieve him of it. On the one occasion this happens, it is as a subterfuge by Boromir, and is a Temptation. And when Strider meets Éomer he declares his purpose with the significant words "the doom of choice". Ultimately, however, and deeply significantly, free will fails, as Frodo puts on the Ring at the Crack of Doom; it is Fate, in the shape of Frodo's curse on Gollum, and Gollum's demise, that rules the destiny of the Rings.

Individuals may take comfort from this – they won't be tossed aside, mere ineffectual ciphers in much greater events. It may even be that on the large scale, referred to briefly by Frodo as he contemplates the stars above Mordor, everything is inevitable, that gods and men alike are the result of what has already been set in motion. Certainly there is no mention of the source of any purpose, although such a source is implicit in the creation myth of *The Silmarillion*. "The universe of Tolkien," says Spacks (1968, p. 90) "unlike that of the Anglo-Saxons, is ultimately affirmative. Within the vast affirmative context however there are enormous possibilities for immediate evil: the individual exists in a realm where choice is always necessary". And it is the individual who benefits from good choice – by virtue of spiritual growth.

Theological problems

What is the distinction between power for destruction in the hands of Good as opposed to the hands of evil? Finding none or little was the philosophical corner that post-war thinkers had painted themselves into, in Tolkien's view, by the application of an excess liberality. "His reading of heroic poems made him especially scornful of the notion that to say 'evil must be fought' is the same as saying 'might is right'" says Shippey (1982). In the liberal interpretation it seems that the continuous battle against evil is merely a contest between opposing ethical

systems. Tolkien has his answer. "But you have not plotted to cover the earth with your trees, and choke every other living thing" says Gandalf, when Treebeard expresses inner doubts. It is destruction in the pursuit of power and domination that is evil, not the destruction itself. Nonetheless there are references to the battle between opposing ethical systems – we are constantly reminded that Good does not have any inbuilt right to win, despite Gandalf's reference to a guiding Purpose. "White is mighty, but black is mightier still" says Gandalf. Nor do the good characters shrink from using the enemies' weapons to worst him, even though the act might be regarded as counter ethical, or even, horror of horrors, counter-liberal. The Devil may use men as his tools, but he cannot hide being them.. Gandalf for instance has no qualms about deceiving Hama, and bullying Wormtongue with magic. He has a greater end im mind.

Another theological problem tackled in *The Silmarillion/The Lord of the Rings* canon is that presented by the existence of an invincible evil god. How can a god be evil, yet undefeated and invincible? What good are Man's struggles if the devil always returns unchanged and renewed? But Tolkien's demons are not constant. They suffer reverses and permanent damage. Melkor is defeated, captured, set free, rises again, is defeated again. He allies with monsters and is capable of suffering defeat that changes his nature and circumstances. In Sauron's case with each new manifestation he is more hideous than before, and his power is capable of being dissipated, as it is when the Ring is destroyed.

Regeneration

In Norse mythology the gods were bound up with the earth and lived and died with it, which formed the boundary of the their immortality. The Nordic belief was that even the Gods were part of the great regeneration cycle.

This leads both to weakness and to strength. As we are in collective terms renewed with each generation, we have to learn the lessons all over again, but we are constantly invigorated as a race, or if you prefer as a continuous being, by the life/death cycle. Unlike the elves we have no race memory. But the elves have their own sorrows, not the least of which is that they feel the weight of time, and the weariness of constant fighting. No wonder that peace and calm and quiet enjoyment is their chief ambition.

But in the cycle of triumphs and defeats that is the Middle-earth sagas there is no complacency, no return after victory to a previous state of wealth or contentment. After every saga something has been lost, a change has been effected, even though evil has been defeated. This is a constantly reiterated metaphor of the Fall. Man must constantly strive, even though defeat is inevitable, to prove his worthiness. The source of hope however is endless renewal.

With death necessarily comes regeneration. It may be a gift, or a doom, but it follows automatically from the Fall and the coming of Death.

Tolkien felt strongly the necessity for a male and female construct. Even the Valar had male and female temperaments, before they ever came into the world. With it necessarily came the concept of characteristics inseparable from gender, and Tolkien followed tradition in making destructiveness a masculine trait, regeneration a feminine. But it is plain from the text that he felt that each characteristic was essential, if life is to survive. If there were no destruction, regeneration would cease. Endless life would be intolerable, (cf. Bilbo 'stretching' but not growing under the influence of the Ring). Endless life does not bring more life.

Essentially this is the fate of the Elves. They are immortal, yet doomed to stagnation by reason of that. It is destruction and regeneration, not continuance, that is the engine of vigorous life. A garden untended grows rank, every jungle becomes a place of casual death and constant reabsorption. The Elves' reaction was to slow down reproduction to a crawl, except initially, when numbers were need. In the first age it is the indeed endless war and regeneration that stimulates the Elves. It is likely however that the Elves never fully understand the fate of men. "Seldom do they fail of their seed" says Gimli, in answer to Legolas' wholly elf-like notion of the eternal failure that characterises Man's efforts.

Such a philosophy contains both hope and despair. Tolkien however did not intend to depress his more theologically minded readers with the prospect of ultimate doom, or the

futility of man's actions, but to see hope as a promise from God, and struggle as an essential part of Man's salvation. One might also read into it, though I do not pretend to any more than a circumstantial connection, that progress, especially industrial progress, is also a doomed attempt to defeat the Monsters – doomed because they are not the monsters within ourselves, but the monsters of time, discomfort, hard labour and personal death.

> It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than [an] imaginary poem of a great king's fall. It glimpses the cosmic, and moves with the thoughts of all men concerning the fate of all human lives and efforts.

So wrote Tolkien about *Beowulf* (1983, p. 33). In its saturation with aspects both great and small of the unconsciously glimpsed overpowering theme of regeneration, the same might also be said of *The Lord of the Rings*.

References

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