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## Possible Echoes of Blackwood and Dunsany in Tolkien's Fantasy

DALE J. NELSON

Jared Lobdell's *A Tolkien Compass* (1975) published Tolkien's "Guide to the Names in the *Lord of the Rings*," but a reference that Tolkien makes to Algernon Blackwood, in the manuscript of his "Nomenclature of *The Lord of the Rings*" (to use Tolkien's own title for the essay), was omitted from Lobdell's book. Tolkien thought that the "Crack of Doom" might have been derived from something written by Blackwood that he was unable to remember more precisely (Anderson 106). However, Lobdell himself, in his 1981 book *England and Always: Tolkien's World of the Rings*, suggested that Tolkien was influenced by "The Willows" and "The Glamour of the Snow," two stories of the supernatural by Blackwood (1869-1951). These stories appeared in 1907 and 1912 collections of Blackwood's tales. Lobdell could have suggested that a third Blackwood story, the oft-reprinted "The Wendigo," from *The Lost Valley* (1910), also left a mark on Tolkien's imagination.

In this story, Fifty Island Water, a remote region of Canada, is haunted by a "great Outer Horror," the embodiment of the "Panic of the Wilderness," which steals its victims even from their tents, bearing them aloft to race across the skies with it, their anguished cries of pain and terror descending to appall their erstwhile companions. Défago, the guide of a party of hunters, is reft away, leaving them bewildered. Blackwood's idea of a rapidly flying horror that crosses the skies, bringing dread to those who hear it and sense its presence, is much akin to Tolkien's conception of the soaring, mounted Nazgûl who appear from time to time to strike panic in the hearts of Sauron's opponents. Here is a passage from Blackwood:

And it was in that moment of distress and confusion that the whip of terror laid its most nicely calculated lash about [the heart of one of the hunters]. It dropped with deadly effect upon the sorest spot of all, completely unnerving him. He had been secretly dreading all the time that it would come—and come it did.

Far overhead, muted by great height and distance, strangely thinned and wailing, he heard the crying voice of Défago, the guide.

The sound dropped upon him out of that still, wintry sky with an effect of dismay and terror unsurpassed. He stood motionless an instant, listening as it were with his whole body, then staggered back against the nearest tree for support, disorganised hopelessly in mind and spirit. To him, in that moment, it seemed the most shattering and dislocating experience he had ever known, so that his heart emptied itself of all feeling whatsoever, as by a sudden draught. (186)

Here is Tolkien, in the chapter “The Siege of Gondor,” in *The Return of the King*. Pippin and Beregond are on one of the walls of Minas Tirith:

Suddenly as they talked they were stricken dumb, frozen as it were to listening stones. Pippin cowered down with his hands pressed to his ears: but Beregond, who had been looking out from the battlement as he spoke of Faramir, remained there, stiffened, staring out with starting eyes. Pippin knew the shuddering cry that he had heard: it was the same that he had heard long ago in the Marish of the Shire, but now it was grown in power and hatred, piercing the heart with a poisonous despair:

... Another long screech rose and fell, and he threw himself back again from the wall, panting like a hunted animal.

(*RK*, V, iv, 82)

Both the Wendigo and the Nazgûl are associated with sniffing. Early in Blackwood’s story, Défago makes his companion uneasy as he rises from the campfire to catch the scent of the distant creature (171), which is later said to be “acrid” and “not unlike the odour of a lion” (180), a “penetrating, unaccustomed odour, vile, yet sweetly bewildering” (200). The Ringwraith, a frightening, cloaked figure, who pursues the hobbits within the bounds of the Shire itself, sniffs from beneath its hood as it tracks them (*FR*, I, iii, 84-85). The Ringwraiths or Nazgûl are hunters, pursuers, as well as warriors whose chief weapon is fear. Similarly, the Wendigo is a creature that chases its quarry: “A vision of Défago, eternally hunted, driven and pursued across the skiey vastness of those ancient forests fled like a flame across the dark ruin of his [companion’s] thoughts” (187). Further, the Wendigo and the winged mount of the chief of the Nazgûl appear to be ancient creatures. One of the hunters, a “divinity student” from Scotland, thinks that the hunters

had witnessed something crudely and essentially primitive. Something that had survived somehow the advance of humanity had emerged terrifically, betraying a scale of life

still monstrous and immature. He envisaged it rather as a glimpse into prehistoric ages, when superstitions, gigantic and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men; when the forces of nature were still untamed, the Powers that may have haunted a primeval universe not yet withdrawn. (Blackwood 205)

The Nazgûl mount is described, at close quarters, thus:

[I]t stank. A creature of an older world maybe it was, whose kind, lingering in forgotten mountains cold beneath the Moon, outstayed their day, and in hideous eyrie bred this last untimely brood, apt to evil. (*RK*, V, vi, 115)

Here at last, incidentally, Tolkien has, like Blackwood, associated the Nazgûl mount with a vile odor.

Finally, the victims of the Wendigo and the Nazgûl may become like them. There are two earthbound appearances of Défago after his kidnapping by the Wendigo. The Défago who first returns to the hunters has a distorted, animal-like face, but worst of all is the change to his feet, which have become “dark and oddly massed” (203) like those of the Wendigo. This Défago returns to the wilderness and the Wendigo. Later, the hunters find Défago, this time assuredly human, but ruined mentally and physically debilitated, awaiting them at their chief camp. Défago now tries to survive, like the Wendigo, on moss (and cannot eat food), “forlorn and broken beyond all reach of human aid” (206-7). Frodo, similarly, was in danger of becoming a wraith. Gandalf tells him, as he convalesces in Rivendell after being attacked:

“They tried to pierce your heart with a Morgul-knife which remains in the wound. If they had succeeded, you would have become like they are. . . . You would have become a wraith under the dominion of the Dark Lord. . . . You were in gravest peril while you wore the Ring, for you were half in the wraith-world yourself.” (*FR*, II, i, 234)

Whether Tolkien was consciously influenced by Blackwood’s story or not, it seems reasonable to surmise that he had read it and that it affected his conception of the Ringwraiths and their aerial mounts.

Blackwood’s contemporary Lord Dunsany (1878-1957) also produced numerous volumes of fantastic fiction published when Tolkien was young. Tolkien may have read Dunsany’s fantasy when he wrote the first version of “The Mewlips” (“Knocking at the Door: Lines Induced by Sensations When Waiting for an Answer at the Door of an Exalted Academic Person,” published in the *Oxford Magazine* on 18 February 1937);

certainly, by the time he came to revise it for inclusion in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, in February 1967 he had sufficient acquaintance with Dunsany's work to be able to criticize the Irish peer's "Distressing Tale of Thangobrinde the Jeweller" as being in Dunsany's "worst style" (de Camp 243). The parallels between Dunsany's short story "The Hoard of the Gibbelins," originally appearing in *The Book of Wonder* (1912), and Tolkien's poem "The Mewlips" appear to be sufficiently strong to warrant confidence that Tolkien had read Dunsany early on and, like so many lesser fantasists, been influenced by him, if only this once.

Dunsany's Gibbelins dwell in an "evil tower . . . joined to Terra Cognita, to the lands we know, by a bridge" across the River Ocean. Their immense hoard attracts a continuous supply of would-be thieves, who inevitably end up being devoured by the wicked creatures, who "eat, as is well known, nothing less good than man" (Dunsany 63). Alderic, a knight, reasons that he can break in to the hoard if he makes a hole in the tower wall, letting water and himself into their "emerald-cellar," but, in the event, the Gibbelins were evidently waiting for him all along, and hang him up like an animal carcass—"and the tale is one of those that have not a happy ending" (66).

Tolkien's sly Mewlips likewise dwell outside the "Terra Cognita" of the Shire of the poem's putative hobbit-author. They dwell not by the side of Ocean, but beyond "the Merlock Mountains . . . by a dark pool's borders," lurking in damp cellars where they "count their gold" and await victims (*Bombadil* 45). Anyone who seeks their hoard will find the Mewlips, and they will "feed"; and "when they've finished, in a sack / Your bones they take to keep" (46).

Aside from the close similarities of situation in the story and the poem, the reader will detect a charming quality of insincerity; these are narratives that "warn" of imaginary dangers.

Tolkien's letters and other sources for his life do not say very much about his recreational reading, but given his lifelong interest in literary fantasy and the parallels adduced above, one seems to be justified in suspecting that Tolkien was indebted to Blackwood and Dunsany.

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