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ON THE CONCEPT OF HOPE IN THE WORK OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the work of J. R. R. Tolkien in the context of the concept of hope as it is defined in the Thomist philosophical system. The thrust of the argument is that the distinction between the two meanings of the word: hope defined as an appetitive passion of the soul and hope understood as one of the theological virtues provides a viable conceptual key to a discussion of the way in which the idea of hope functions in J. R. R. Tolkien's classic works of fantasy fiction. The analysis seeks to trace the evolution of this basic dichotomy throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and the most pertinent sections of the *legendarium* presenting how the notion of hope functions for the civilization of the Elves and of Men, and also how the interaction between the passion and the virtue of hope impacts upon the construction and function of some of the key the individual characters of Tolkien's fiction.

KEYWORDS: TOLKIEN, HOPE, AQUINAS, FANTASY, MIDDLE-EARTH

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł zawiera omówienie twórczości J. R. R. Tolkiena w kontekście pojęcia nadziei w ujęciu zdefiniowanym przez św. Tomasza z Akwinu. Celem argumentu jest prześledzenie jak dwa rodzaje nadziei wyróżnione w głównym dziele św. Tomasza – *Summa Theologica*: nadzieja pojmowana jako uczucie oraz nadzieja postrzegana jako cnota teologiczna odzwierciedlone jest w twórczości J. R. R. Tolkiena, pozostającej pod determinującym wpływem myśli i teologii katolickiej. Analiza obejmuje główne dzieła Tolkiena, które składają się na wizję świata wtórnego rozwiniętą w eposie *Władca Pierścieni* oraz w towarzyszącym mu *legendarium*.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: TOLKIEN, NADZIEJA, ŚW. TOMASZ, FANTASTYKA, ŚRÓDZIEMIE

The purpose of the present argument is to account for the way in which the concept of hope functions in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the most relevant sections of the *legendarium*, which collectively develop the author's vision of his subcreated fictional world. The proposition here is to trace the use of the idea of hope against the background of the classic philosophical and theological legacy of the medieval period, which constituted for Tolkien the heritage he chose to continually embrace and refer to in his life's work and which provided the conceptual standpoint for his creative endeavor.

In order to develop a proper understanding of the role and place of the concept of hope in medieval thought we shall turn to the person of St. Thomas Aquinas and

his most central work for it is on the pages of his *Summa Theologica* that we may find what arguably constitutes the most systemic, sensitive and eloquent presentation of the conceptual apparatus by means of which European medieval culture sought to define weighty philosophical concept like the one we are now concerned with¹.

The first thing to be observed while consulting the monumental scholarly edifice which is *Summa Theologica* is that what may be understood by *spes* is allocated distinct treatment in two separate sections of the Second Part of Aquinas' work. This is the consequence of the fact that "hope" denotes here two distinct concepts. Reformulating the Aristotelian semantic framework in the normative context of Christian theology, St. Thomas distinguishes between two phenomena named hope. First, hope is understood as one of the four lower passions residing in the appetitive power of the human soul and naturally operational at the crosscut between sensitive "layer" of the soul which constitutes the instinctive way in which all kinds of animate beings relate to their environment and the intellectual "layer" determined by acts of the rational judgement of Intellect and the acts of Will. Placed in this way alongside fear, joy and sadness, hope is here a part of the apparatus by means of which Reason formulates its relation to the phenomena encountered in the natural world of Creation.

Secondly, hope is, alongside faith and charity, one of the three theological virtues located in the intellectual power of the Will of the rational soul and, in this capacity, hope is not a passion, but a habit of mind ("habitus mentus" – *Summa*, II, II, 17.1)² whose specificity of operation is a direct result of the influence of the Grace of God upon the Will and its sole aim is to direct the human soul in its pursuit of "eternal", or "supernatural happiness" ("beatitudo aeterna/beatitudo supernaturalis" – *Summa* I, II, 62, 1/ II, II, 17, 1) by making it partake of Divine guidance.

In effect, the word *spes* may denote here two ideas which are ontologically wide apart from each other as Aquinas explains juxtaposing them implicitly in the Second Part of the *Summa*:

Now the act of hope is a movement of the appetitive faculty, since its object is a good. And, since there is a twofold appetite in man, namely, the sensitive which is divided into irascible and concupiscible, and the intellectual appetite, called the will, [...] those movements which occur in the lower appetite, are with passion, while those in the higher appetite are without passion [...]. Now the act of the virtue of hope cannot belong to the sensitive appetite, since the good which is the principal object of this virtue, is not a sensible but a Divine good. Therefore hope resides in the higher appetite called the will, and not in the lower appetite, of which the irascible is a part.

Summa Theologica, II, II, 18, 1.

¹ On the relation of Tolkien's work to the heritage of Thomism, see also MILBANK (2016: 43–57).

² All quotations for the *Summa* on the basis of <https://dhsprriory.org/thomas/summa/>.

As becomes evident one of the most crucial differences separating the two concepts is that the appetitive hope derives from the sum of individual experience and general outlook which determines the scope and character of a given person's predictions and expectations which become formulated into the hopeful passions of the Will. Although these passions will be aided by the person's intellectual virtue (*Summa*, II, I, 40,5), they will still reflect the individual knowledge and attitudes in their specificity and intensity. As Aquinas further explains in his discussion of the passion of hope:

[...] experience is a cause of hope, in so far as it makes him reckon something possible, which before his experience he looked upon as impossible. However, in this way, experience can cause a lack of hope: because just as it makes a man think possible what he had previously thought impossible; so, conversely, experience makes a man consider as impossible that which hitherto he had thought possible. Accordingly experience causes hope in two ways, despair in one way: and for this reason we may say rather that it causes hope.

Summa Theologica, I, II, 40, 5.

Thus hope understood as a passion marks here the furthest limit of man's psychological contact with reality and the furthest reach of individual expectation. This binds the concept of the appetitive hope to individual perception in way which is instantly transcended when one speaks of hope in the sense of theological virtue which is bestowed upon an individual through the operation of Divine Grace and apart from the constant and unerring character of its object, it provides a rationale for individual actions which extends well beyond the accumulated experience of a lifetime, while the ability to partake of this sort of hope is determined by one's participation in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When the more precise mechanism of the operation of the theological virtues upon the individual mind is discussed by Aquinas in the course of the *Summa* (I, II, 62, 1) he chooses to avail himself of a quotation from *Ecclesiasticus*:

Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him.

[...]

You who fear the Lord, hope for those good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy.

Ecclesiasticus, 2, 6–9³.

As the apologetic character of the whole of J.R. R. Tolkien's work and the importance of his Catholicism have been extensively studied by scholars of calibre⁴, it will come as no particular surprise that, if one chooses to devote one's attention to the study of the role and function of concepts like hope in Tolkien's fiction as developed in his originally published works and on the pages of the *legendarium*,

³ *The New Jerusalem Bible*, London 1985.

⁴ See CALDECOTT (2005: 48–67); BROWN (2012: 15–40); WOOD (2003), *passim*.

the weight of the legacy of classical philosophy in its specifically medieval formulation may provide an opportune and relevant key to decoding some of the underlying meaning immanent in the texture of the narratives which collectively unveil before us a creative vision of a complex and intricate secondary world⁵.

Thus as we enter upon the subcreated reality with the account of its creation as presented in *Ainulindalë* we shall easily recognise, in the account of the descent of the Valar upon the newly-created Eä, an echo of the just-invoked passage from the *Book of Ecclesiasticus*:

Now the Valar took to themselves shape and hue; and because they were drawn into the World by love of the Children of Ilúvatar, for whom they hoped, they took shape after that manner which they had beheld in the Vision of Ilúvatar, save only in majesty and splendour.
The Silmarillion, 16⁶.

As the wording seems to indicate here, the relationship between the spiritual beings corresponding to the angelic intelligences known from our primary reality and their Divine Author known in this particular subcreated reality as Eru, or Ilúvatar, is made explicable through the reference to hope as a stable condition of existence manifested in spiritual creatures enjoying a constant, direct contact with their Creator. It is in this way that the full potential implicit in hope understood as a theological virtue is here made apparent and it will henceforth provide the context against which the fortunes of individuals, nations and species inhabiting the material universe of Eä and the world of Arda will be measured. Further on, we learn that the virtue of hope is the special domain of one of the Valar of “feminine” form called Nienna, whose role is to constantly contest the strength of spiritual hope against the destructiveness of the grief and suffering inherent in the progress of material Creation through the physical time. Therefore “those who hearken to her learn pity, and endurance in hope” as we read in *The Silmarillion*, 22.

Within Arda the concept of hope will prove constantly vital for the two chief sapient species which will dominate its landscape and history throughout the centuries that will make up its history, i.e. the Firstborn Children of Ilúvatar – the Elves and the Secondborn Children – Men. Yet, while the basic, pivotal dichotomy between the two definitions of hope will prove equally valid for both kinds, there will also be here a substantial difference making the respective fortunes of the two species markedly different and as such it will require distinct treatment in an argument like the present one. This is because in the primary reality, as one remembers from the above argument, the virtue of hope has eternal happiness as its direct and final aim, which is the case of mankind means achieving an eternal union

⁵ The issue of hope in the work of Tolkien has been also discussed by KREEFT (2003: 199–204) and STEPHEN (2012: 195–228).

⁶ All quotations from *The Silmarillion* on the basis of the 2004 edition, for details see bibliography.

with God in the afterlife, and that is the reflection of the species' postlapsarian condition. Now, while in Tolkien's secondary world the ultimate source and destination of hope understood as a theological virtue lies in the person of the Creator, an afterlife accessible through natural death is destined solely for Men, while the Elves are bound, through immortality, to the fabric of the natural, material Creation.

Hence the Elves' quest for their spiritual destiny is played out against the natural landscape of Arda as the eschatological frame of existence blends here with the ancestral history of houses and peoples. When, shortly upon their creation and the war waged upon Melkor by the Valar in Middle-earth the Elves receive summons to abandon the precarious security of the doomed continent and join the Valar in the blessed realm of Valinor laying across the sea on the continent of Aman, the limit of the species' spiritual mettle is measured by the degree to which the call of the Valar awakened in elven peoples the virtue of hope based on the continued trust in the valour, prescience and inherent goodness of the angelic guardians of the created world. Consequently the speed and effectiveness in answering the summons will forever divide the Elves into the Eldar (distinguishing further the Vanyar, the Noldor and the Teleri) and the Avari, who failed to answer the call and embark on the Great Journey.

While for the Vanyar the continued fellowship with the hallowed spirits proves enough to assure their continued sojourn in the earthly paradise of Valinor, in the case of the Noldor the idyllic state turns to a historical tragedy spanning a succession of generations when Valinor becomes invaded by Melkor, who succeeds in the destruction of the Two Trees which had been the source of light and a palpable sense of spiritual closeness of the divine source of life for all of Arda. As the Trees become destroyed and the three priceless jewels which preserved essence of their light stolen by Melkor, the fated leader of the Noldor, the royal prince Feänor succumbs to the artful temptation of the renegade Vala in the wake of which he first refuses to surrender the Silmarils to contribute to the effort of resuscitating the trees and then leads most of his father's people back to Middle-earth in a desperate effort to win the jewels back from Morgoth.

We may observe here how the fiery spirit of righteousness fanned by the keen sense of moral outrage drives Feänor to become an unwitting agent of evil and destruction in his desperate display of egotistic heroics. We may first see how Feänor is first manipulated into putting the exquisite creation of his own hand above the hallowed nature of the land by virtue of which the making of the Silmarils was possible. Then the Noldor prince is putting trust in the power of his righteous anger and awakening a misguided passion of hope whereby the jewels are the aim and limit of its reach and Ilúvatar himself a mere trustee of the vow. In other words, hope in the virtue of the Silmarils becomes misplaced ever since the Silmarils become a tool in the creation of discord between the Valar and the Elves and an enduring symbol of it, which is the value the jewels have for Melkor as, of course, bestowing ultimate value and placing ultimate hope in material object will

invariably expose one to this sort of danger turning a noble individual into an agent of evil and destruction.

Out of this hope Melkor creates, in the centuries to come, an instrument by means of which he repeatedly succeeds in obliterating both the Elves and the Men of Middle-earth as both obstinately strive against his angelic might without help from the estranged Valar. Consequently the history of the First Age of Arda is marked by a progressive ruin of all the designs and schemes by means of which the rulers of the Noldor and of the Sindar attempt to forestall the continuous expansion of the power of Morgoth. In this way the vanity of all hopes relying on anything but the continued watchfulness and favor of the forces through which Divine Providence is manifested on Eä is successively exposed as the Elves are virtually driven out of Middle-earth altogether.

Thus, as Ulmo explains bestowing an embassy to king Turgon on the young Tuor:

{...} all the works of their hands shall perish, and every hope which they built shall crumble, the last hope alone is left, the hope that they have not looked for and have not prepared. And that hope lieth in thee;

The Fall of Gondolin, (last version, 1951: 166⁷).

In this way the true value of the virtue of hope over the beguiling passions of the heart is finally unveiled before the leader of the last stronghold of the Noldor in Middle-earth:

Then Turgon pondered long the counsel of Ulmo, and there came into his mind the words that were spoken to him in Vinyamar: 'Love not too well the work of thy hands and the devices of thy heart; and remember that the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West, and cometh from the Sea.'

The Silmarillion, 314.

As we may see the notion of hope is, for the Elves, most immediately bound with the concept of trust, and consequently it is the failure of continued trust that makes the Noldor exchange the hope based upon a continued friendship with the Valar for the elusive hopes founded upon the valour of their kings, endurance of their alliances and impregnability of their strongholds.

Importantly it is against this unveiling historical drama that the Secondborn Children of Ilúvatar come of age during the First Age of Arda. Although mankind is not meant to find the limit of its hope within the confines of the physical world of Eä so the tragic fortunes of the Elves with which the lot of the first generations of men are intertwined serve as a backdrop to the development of the eschatological consciousness of the Edain.

⁷ Quotation after *The Fall of Gondolin* in the 2018 edition by Christopher Tolkien, see bibliography.

As we witness the lives of the Men of the First Age, we may discern that Ilúvatar's new creatures are of distinct spiritual constitution being at once weaker and stronger than their elder brethren. It seems no coincidence that at the opening of the tale of Beren and Lúthien and the unprecedented daring which was the theft of the Silmarils from the crown of Morgoth we find an account of how the misguided passion of hope proved the undoing of Barahir's committed band of guerilla fighters. As a bout of despondency and desperate home-sickness overwhelms Gorlim after he is made to witness the apparitions of Morgoth⁸ in which the unfortunate outlaw recognizes a vision of his lost homestead and his missing wife, he proceeds to surrender all virtue and judgement in betraying the whereabouts of their hide-out directly to Melkor. Here the personal experience of the past and the despair born of it become the source of a monstrous birth of a passion of hope which seeks compassionate redress of suffering and pain at the very heart of the world's evil:

A sickness held his soul for ease
 and hope, and even thralldom's chain
 if he might find his wife again.

The Lay of Leithian, ll. 196-198⁹.

As we may see Gorlim's betrayal of his fellow soldiers and friends as the bottom-line for a pathetic display of a misplaced, though passionate, hope, we should also observe, first, that Gorlim's expectations are in fact more probable than the expectation of success which led Beren in his quest for the Silmarils and, secondly, that for all the obvious differences, there exists a parallel in Gorlim's miserable act of wishful thinking and Feänor's ill-fated vow in that both stem from a desire to restore the past instead of embracing the challenge of the future. It seems that it is this specific element that makes the high heroism of the elven lord's noble anger as much of a practical failure as the low-spirited weakness of Barahir's companion.

It is also important that in both cases the passion of hope rests in the expectation of finding a weakness in evil rather than strength in its opposite. Sticking further to the Thomist terminology we might say that, as hope becomes here mixed with other desperate passions of the soul, the Will proceeds in action upon misconceived judgment of the Intellect which miscalculates the odds as the person deems himself either too strong or else too weak and also miscalculates the motifs of the other side. This in turn leads a person to perceive human strengths and weaknesses reflected in the spirit of evil and labour under the misconception that they may somehow outdo it in anger or in desperation.

Against this context the success of the star-crossed pair of lovers in the halls of Angband, as well as their overall continued commitment to the success of the

⁸ This becomes the role of Sauron in *the Silmarillion* version of the story.

⁹ Quotation after *The Lays of Beleriand. The History of Middle-earth*, the 1985 edition by Christopher Tolkien, see bibliography.

unprecedented union between the representatives of the two distinct kinds of the children of Ilúvatar, is an act of hope not grounded on any possible precedent or calculation of probability. This seems to constitute a certain proof that Tolkien's world is so saturated with Divine Providence that only hopeless quests have a chance of succeeding within it.

This tendency seems to find its confirmation in another example when a character undertakes a quest against all expectation of success which might be built upon anyone's personal experience or informed reasoning. As the First Age draws to a close a desperate voyage in search of Valinor is undertaken by Eärendil. While Eärendil's father – Tuor effectively failed in his errand to the king of Gondolin, it cannot but be perceived as significant that his own son born of the union with Turgon's royal daughter will in due time become successful in his quest to win the Valar's pardon and mercy for the beleaguered races of Middle-earth. What is most crucial here is that the result of the turbulent and tragic fortunes of the First Age is a general recognition of the value of finding the proper repository for one's hope and also a realization that henceforth the notion of hope shall be less concerned with whatever value may be born, grown or produced by craft within the confines of the created physical world:

Yet Eärendil saw now no hope left in the lands of Middle-earth, and he turned again in despair and came not home, but sought back once more to Valinor with Elwing at his side.

The Silmarillion, 325.

The most emphatic indication of this is the fate of the Silmarils themselves, which become, at the end of the era, effectively submerged into the elements, while the one used by Eärendil as help in his voyage to find the Blessed Realm of Valinor functions as the beacon of the new idea of hope as it lights the sky above Middle-earth:

Now when first Vingilot was set to sail in the seas of heaven, it rose unlocked for, glittering and bright; and the people of Middle-earth beheld it from afar and wondered, and they took it for a sign, and called it Gil-Estel, the Star of High Hope.

The Silmarillion, 328.

Yet the realm of Valinor continues to feature in the physical landscape of Arda and its presence will in time become a crucial issue in the relations between the ascendant race of Men and their angelic guardians during the Second Age. Indeed, the physical existence of the Blessed Realm and favour of its inhabitants had for centuries marked the true destination and the limit of hope as it was designed for the race of the Elves and to recognize this fact proved a strenuous challenge throughout Arda's First Age. As the civilization of the Secondborn has risen to the social and ethical standards against the backdrop of the Elves' struggle to refocus their spiritual point of reference, it became inevitably affected by this circumstance and had, in its

due turn, to forge its own distinctive spiritual identity which would answer to the unique status of the species in grand vision of Ilúvatar.

The protracted and painful nature of this process is clearly visible in the history of the Dúndain kingdom of Númenor, which constituted the pinnacle of the civilization of Men during the Second Age and whose ultimate destruction not only marked the end of that historical period, but also ushered in a rearrangement of the world's geography which resulted in a permanent exclusion of Valinor from the continuity of Arda's physical space.

It seems that the earliest roots of the tragic history may be already seen in Eärendil's conviction that the lands of Middle-earth offer no chance of secure habitat and that it would naturally be the inevitable lot of the sapient races to seek refuge in the protection of the Valar in the lands of Aman. Thus for Men of Middle-earth to be inducted into the universal scheme of Creation during the time of a steady and methodical eradication of the civilization of the Elves by the forces of evil resulted in developing a realization of the inherent vanity of any hope bestowed upon the fleeting success that valour and virtue may achieve within the confines of the material world. Yet to develop a new idea of hope which would answer to the species' unique status in Creation proved a more difficult task as race of the Dúndain chose to seek to model its idea for the virtue of hope on the one now finally recognized by the Elves. Thus, while for the Elves the violent recoil from the accepting Valinor as the object and limit of hope had proved the root of their numerous trials and misfortunes during the First Age, so an obstinate urge to deny the true nature of their spiritual vocation by making a desperate attempt to circumvent death by winning entrance to the "Immortal Lands" proved the undoing of Men during the Second Age of Arda.

Viewed from this perspective the history of the kingdom and civilization of Númenor from its initial splendor and accomplishments, through a long process of compromising the culture's moral integrity by a mixture of complacency brought about by the sense of grandeur and supposed invincibility as well as the clandestine sedition of Sauron, until its final feat of manic desperation culminating in an attempt to invade Valinor in a mistaken belief that it is the inherent virtue of the land that causes the creatures living there to be immortal, constitutes a process of learning to find and accept the final end of hope as one stretching beyond natural death and losing all attachment to the threats, values and wonders found within the circuit of the created universe. This in turn may only be achieved when the Dúndain learn to appreciate the distinctiveness bestowed by Ilúvatar upon the human race, as the messengers of the Valar describe to at length to king Tar-Ciryatan:

[...] you and your people are not of the Firstborn, but are mortal Men as Ilúvatar made you. Yet it seems that you desire now to have the good of both kindreds, to sail to Valinor when you will, and to return when you please to your homes. That cannot be. Nor can the Valar take away the gifts of Ilúvatar. The Eldar, you say, are unpunished, and even those who rebelled do not die. Yet that is to them neither reward nor punishment, but the fulfilment of their being.

They cannot escape, and are bound to this world, never to leave it so long as it lasts, for its life is theirs. And you are punished for the rebellion of Men, you say, in which you had small part, and so it is that you die. But that was not at first appointed for a punishment. Thus you escape, and leave the world, and are not bound to it, in hope or in weariness.

The Silmarillion, 343.

It appears that the Númenóreans are at this point able to recognize the need for hope to be based on firmer and more long-lasting foundations than may be offered in anyone's valour and resilience and this seems to be a lesson well-learned from the tragic fortunes of the Noldor in Middle-earth. In other words, the Númenóreans seem to have learned to distinguish between the passion and the virtue of hope and would gladly opt for the latter. Yet the mental indebtedness which seems to bind humans at this time to the specific outlook of the elder species makes it impossible for Men to disconnect the experience of the virtue of hope from its dependence upon personal or communal experience:

And the Númenóreans answered: 'Why should we not envy the Valar, or even the least of the Deathless? For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us in a little while. And yet we also love the Earth and would not lose it.'

The Silmarillion, 343.

Thus, while, in the case of the Elves, the memory of communal experience of history was essentially enough to constitute a foundation for a renewal of the spiritual bond with the Creator and a revitalized sense of purpose, in the case of Men the acceptance of hope as a virtue requires a new kind of trust for which no foundation in the existential experience may be found beyond such as stems from the general recognition of a divinely inspired order and purpose and goodness in Creation. Thus essentially the Númenóreans attempt to conquer the fear of death with the passion of hope instead of the virtue and, as of the two passions fear has more foundation in experience, the exercise is inevitably doomed to failure. Hence in answering the messengers of the Valar the Men of Númenor expresses a wish to be given an "assurance" which would somehow transform the passion of hope into the virtue of hope functioning as a form of certainty of secure expectation existing on its own without the fellow theological virtue of faith which properly precedes it and from which hope naturally follows (as Aquinas explains in the *Summa*: II, 2, 17, 7). In other words, faith performs, for the intellectual hope, the function corresponding to that which experience performs for the appetitive hope. Importantly, in the case of the Elves the role of faith had been fulfilled by trust for which experience would have formed a convincing basis. Now, for the Númenóreans, who modelled their idea of hope upon that of the Elves, experience is clearly not enough to form the basis of trust which extends beyond the boundaries of the physical universe and, in this sort of arrangement, hope without faith amounts to no more than "blind trust".

Consequently, in their ultimate rejection of the message of the Valar, the people of Númenor resolve to reject the idea of hope altogether seeking instead to circumvent or stifle the fear of death by seeking to suppress whatever would be suggested about the futility of such an exercise by the rational powers of the Intellect, which in its due and inevitable curse leads to a detraction from the ways of wisdom and intellectual virtue and a consequent decline of the Númenórean civilization:

But Atanamir was ill pleased with the counsel of the Messengers and gave little heed to it, and the greater part of his people followed him; for they wished still to escape death in their own day, not waiting upon hope.

The Silmarillion, 344.

The ultimate destruction of Númenor precipitates a thorough rearrangement of Arda's geography of which the most important element is the removal of Valinor from the natural physical continuum of Arda's spatial design making it impossible to gain access to the Blessed Realm from within the material universe. This circumstance corresponds to the human species ascending to prominence on the continent of Middle-earth during the Third Age of Arda. It is during the fourth and final century of that age that the issue of hope once again comes to the fore when a pressing necessity arises for the descendants of the Dúnedain of Númenor and the rulers of the last Elven kingdoms remaining in Middle-earth to deal with the urgent threat posed by the reemergence of the power of Sauron. As we turn now to the account of the council held by Elrond in Rivendell, as it is recounted on the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, we may observe how the contrastive ideas concerning hope are conjured up in the passionate exchanges during the council called to decide the fate of the Ring of Power and the further strategy for opposing the expansion of the power of the rebellious Maya.

Given desperate nature of this belated attempt at forestalling the seemingly invincible power of the dark lord, it becomes a matter of crucial importance to determine one's stance in view of the desperate calculations of chances and fearful predictions and conflicting strategies proposed. When it comes to the issue of hope we will see the idea of hope as a passion clearly contrasted with the notion of the virtue.

The idea of hope enters into the deliberations of the council through a wistful reminiscence of the council's president and ruler of the last elven stronghold in Middle-earth as he recounts his lifetime experience of struggle with the forces of Melkor and subsequently of Sauron:

I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories.

The Fellowship of the Ring, 316¹⁰.

¹⁰ All quotations for *The Lord of the Rings* on the basis of the 1995 edition, see bibliography.

Here the echo of reflection and regret brings back the vanity of the Elves' many misguided hopes during the First Age. After the story of the One Ring is recounted against this background, Gandalf gives an account of his encounter with Saruman, who puts the idea of hope at the very centre of his attempt at seducing Gandalf into a supposed alliance:

A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way.

The Fellowship of the Ring, 338–9.

We would recognize that the hope Saruman speaks of is of the appetitive kind not only because it seeks to rely on a selfish calculation of self-interest in determining one's moral stance, but also because the hope one chooses to cling to is not here given even a semblance of being a virtue as the decision to follow any particular path of hope is not based on any absolute ethical direction, but is an arbitrary selection of a course of action from among a number of contrastive possibilities to be accepted or discarded depending on how shrewdly they foster one's egotistic interest in the universal power struggle currently underway in Middle-earth.

The sheer practicality of Saruman's rhetoric is here so persuasive that it may not come as a great surprise that when the turn comes for the elder son of the Steward of Gondor to speak he does not altogether hide his sympathy with Saruman's reasoning. In fact, when it comes to Boromir defining his foundations for hope he does not appear to extend his calculations beyond the clear-headed assessment of the strength of the respective sides in the conflict. Although no one may doubt the altruism of Boromir's intentions at this point, or the purity of his moral stance, it may be noticed that in seeking to augment the military strength of Gondor Boromir inadvertently transfers his hope from the military prowess of his countrymen onto the Ring. This is possible because for Boromir hope is, like for Saruman, a passion for what his experience and rational calculation presents to him as possible. Although Boromir's ethical position remains here uncompromised with regard to the selflessness of his aim, yet his desire to raise the chances of the good side so that its triumph becomes likely enough to make his hopes credible causes him to compromise his ethics in the choice of the means he is prepared to make use of in the pursuit of this worthy aim. In this sense the honest practical soldier of Gondor essentially repeats the mistake made by the Elves during the First Age because as a creature of valour and prowess is again reduced to an obstinate pursuit of a physical artefact. In this context it is not in the least surprising that Boromir's reaction to the news of the possible return of the heir to the Crown of Gondor locates the reference to "a help beyond our hope" (322) in a context of condescending disbelief.

Against all this background it would be difficult not to notice that when Elrond proceeds in due course to refer to the notion of hope he most evidently conceives of it as a virtue:

Now at this last we must take a hard road, a road unforeseen. There lies our hope, if hope it be.
The Fellowship of the Ring, 348.

As we may observe for Elrond hope clearly extends beyond the boundaries of any individual or collective experience and it intrinsically involves a leap of faith directed into the future, beyond any precedent or probability suggested by whatever has happened so far. The attitude proposed by Elrond disconnects hope from any strategic calculation of realistic odds and excludes the idea of choosing between rival hopes based on the current likelihood of success. In this understanding hope is invariably a way forward where the gap between the necessary aim to be accomplished and the realistic prospect of a likely outcome is filled in by faith.

As Elrond winds up the proceedings of the councils, he proceeds to speak of hope once again in such a way which interweaves the direct challenges incumbent on the physical journey to be undertaken by the Fellowship with the spiritual hardships of keeping focus upon the ultimate aim of the quest regardless of varying estimation of success that may affect the morale of the company at any particular stage. It seems here that the circumstance of Elrond's mixed parentage and descent is a key factor behind the way in which the elven noble conjures up the imagery of a journey through a physical landscape to evoke and illustrate the spiritual challenges of the quest:

'At least for a while,' said Elrond. 'The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong.[']

The Fellowship of the Ring, 351.

Thus, as the divergent approaches to the question of hope arise and clash in conflict during the council at Rivendell, we may appreciate just how much of the struggle with the power represented by Sauron happens and is decided within the realm of the individual Intellect and also how crucial is the Intellect's ability to find the right direction in matters concerning ethics and spirituality.

Yet the most vital and defining choices made by the characters involved in the final War of the Ring are decided upon during the dramatic days of the siege of Gondor and the Battle of Pelennor Fields. As all heroic virtue is subjected to the ultimate test at the most intense moments of the war with Sauron, so one's ability to answer to the challenge of hope become a crucial factor determining success of failure both on the individual and collective level.

As the war with Sauron progressively gains more and more intensity the pressure exerted upon the individual capacity to rely on hope grows ever more intense and this fact is clearly recognised by the most spiritually discerning of the characters. Galadriel chooses to emphasize the fact in her final message to Aragorn delivered at the eve of his journey for the Paths of the Dead:

The days now are short. Either our hope cometh, or all hope's end.

The Return of the King, 1015.

Later Aragorn himself echoes this idea as he prepares to march against the powers of Mordor by saying that: "We come now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin" (*The Return of the King*, 1152). What lies at the core of these words is the realization that, as the desperate nature of all attempts to forestall the advance of Sauron by military skills or heroic prowess on the battlefield is finally manifested, there remains no room for any further stimulation of hope as a passion of the soul, however virtuous the soul might be. In other words, in these final dramatic moments of the struggle with Sauron the passion of hope will become an instrument in inducing despair unless one finds refuge in the virtue of hope which alone is able to extend beyond the rational calculation of odds on the basis of what experience and reason indicate as possible. Thus the universal challenge for the characters is to discard the passion of hope while clinging firmly to the virtue in order not to be sidetracked into despair which thwarting of the passion of hope inevitably conjures up.

This process may be traced on the example of two pivotal characters who come to be tested by a temptation directed at turning the passion of hope into its automatic opposite¹¹. Both the last Steward of Gondor and the King of the Rohirrim fall victim to an intricate form of psychological torture which keeps them constantly exposed to the realization of the impossible odds involved in the contemplation of any form of resistance to the evidently superior military might of the lord of Mordor. Thus by virtue of the continued discourse with Grima the Wormtongue, or clandestine sessions with the Palantir, both leaders are constantly reminded of all the military failures, broken promises and missed opportunities of the past. In other words, both are kept imprisoned within the experience of the past from which the mind is not able to abstract lasting virtue, but rather revels in the many proofs of its repeated futility.

In both cases, just like in previously with Boromir, the effectiveness of the temptation is so great because it preys upon the many virtues of the Intellect which both Théoden and Denethor undoubtedly possess, turning their supposed ineffectiveness into a mental scourge which is designed to prevent either of them from finding refuge and consolation in the virtues of the spirit.

In fact, the contrasting fates of the two leaders may be taken to reveal the core of Tolkien's understanding of the idea of hope. If we first consider the tragic lot of the Steward of Gondor we cannot fail to notice that Denethor refers to hope more often than all the other characters of *The Lord of the Rings*:

But most surely not for any argument would he have set this thing at a hazard beyond all but a fool's hope, risking our utter ruin, if the Enemy should recover what he lost

The Return of the King, 1064.

¹¹ For more on this see AMENDT-RADUEGE (2018: 49–50).

‘Comfort me not with wizards!’ said Denethor. ‘The fool’s hope has failed. The Enemy has found it, and now his power waxes; he sees our very thoughts, and all we do is ruinous’. Follow whom you will, even the Grey Fool, though his hope has failed. Here I stay.’

The Return of the King, 1078.

‘Hope on then!’ laughed Denethor. ‘Do I not know thee, Mithrandir? Thy hope is to rule in my stead, to stand behind every throne, north, south, or west.’

The Return of the King, 1118.

Behind the obsessive struggle of Denethor with the idea of hope lies the desperate attempt of a virtuous mind to find a way to recoil from the depths of maddening despair. Thus, in the wake of an unwary exposition to the insinuate suggestions of the powerful and evil mind of Sauron, the very notion of hope becomes, for Denethor, an instrument of psychological torture as the concept itself grows into an embodiment of failure at fulfilling what Denethor perceives as his life-defining obligation of facing and overcoming the evil which poses a threat to the land it is his duty to protect.

In consequence the core of the tragedy is that the heroic strength which makes Denethor exhibit so much resilience to the last moments of his life is directed at fighting the spectre of hope instead of overcoming the despair which overwhelms him, and it is this heroic strength stemming from the keen sense of responsibility which ultimately makes Denethor grossly misjudge the motifs of everyone around him and reject any help offered.

In contrast, it seems that it is the more placid and resigned attitude of Théoden¹² which allows the restitution of his mental and spiritual balance as the king of the Rohirrim finally surrenders himself to the care of the ones he still recognizes as dear to him. In fact, it is through the figure of Théoden that the fullest vision of the virtue of hope is manifested in J. R. R. Tolkien’s fiction. As the king recoils from the nightmare of contemplating the griefs of the past and his own supposed weakness and rides in arms to answer the challenge of the present confrontation with the forces of evil he is able to become an incarnation of all the heroic virtues it would always be his ambition to measure himself against. These virtues seemed to provide enough foothold for Théoden to rise to the challenge of answering to the idea of hope which is disconnected from any reliance on the experience of the past and calculations of the present and becomes, in due course, directed towards the future – so much so, in fact, that the full experience of this act of surrendering oneself to hope is fully experienced not by Théoden himself, but by his loved ones after him:

¹² The relations between Théoden and Eowyn are also discussed in connection with the concept of hope in DICKERSON (2003: 143–145). There the analysis examines the Old English legacy of the relationship.

‘That is grievous,’ she said. ‘And yet it is good beyond all that I dared hope in the dark days, when it seemed that the House of Eorl was sunk in honour less than any shepherd’s cot.

The Return of the King, 1137.

In this way the tragic death of king Théoden becomes the fulfillment of hope for Eowyn. As the virtue of hope looks forward beyond the threshold of what is known, its fulfillment invariably lies “beyond hope” and routinely exceeds expectations. This is because when wishing for the restoration of the fortunes and dignity of her House, no loyal niece would wish for a desperate and cruel war against the overwhelming forces of evil, or the death of her royal uncle in battle, yet the Providential design may need to involve such events to produce an outcome which, for all its tragic aspect, will be recognized as being “beyond hope” by those left to become the recipients and trustees of the legacy born out of a willing act of participation in the virtue of hope made by those whose fate it became to accept the impossible odds in an exercise of faith. In this way the hope mustered by Théoden finds its fulfillment in the hope of Eowyn and the king himself becomes an instrument of the kind of hope he would not be himself able to conceive of, and rightfully wish for, as in order to die heroically in battle one must not make death his hope.

This is the achievement of Théoden and as such it is recognized in the song made for the occasion of his funeral rites:

Hope he rekindled, and in hope ended;

The Return of the King, 1278.

Thus in Tolkien one’s adherence to the virtue of hope is an indispensable element in the fulfillment of the individual “doom” whereby the purpose and meaning of everyone’s existence is realized and justified in the overall scheme of Creation. It is also a way to overcome the anguish of personal tragedy and the existential fear of crossing the threshold of natural death. While it may make it necessary to arrive at a certain indifference towards the fortunes of one’s life and the passions born out of life’s multifold experience, it also constitutes a way of rising to a new form of passion whereby one will come to celebrate one’s individual role in the Providential design with a newly found unity of purpose. Such seems to be the sense behind Galadriel’s parting words to Aragorn, the newly crowned king of Gondor:

‘Elfstone, through darkness you have come to your hope, and have now all your desire. Use well the days!’

The Return of the King, 1286.

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