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## ON THE MOTIF OF *KATABASIS* IN THE WORK OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

The article concerns the use of the literary motif of *katabasis*, or journey to the underworld, in two pivotal works of the contemporary genre of high, or heroic, fantasy: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The first part of the argument briefly discusses the tradition of the motif in the classical epic poetry and in the later Christian tradition. Subsequently the argument traces the role of *katabasis* in the articulation of the respective authors' concepts of the heroic quest.

KEYWORDS: *katabasis*, fantasy, heroism, quest, epic

### TRADITIONS

The literary motif concerning the journey to the underworld developed in the context of the genre of the classical epic and its very emergence was inextricably bound with the forging of the classic array of the narrative conventions which have ever since defined the art of the heroic narrative. Behind this easily recognisable literary motif which denotes a specific stage in the heroic quest of the epic hero lies a much older and conceptually wider incarnation of the idea of *katabasis* – one much more primal and elusive, one which precedes both literate culture and recorded examples of oral literature, as well as the very notion of abstract, figurative conceptualisation on which most of the intellectual life of contemporary civilisations is based. This second, wider definition takes foundation from before literature, it operates in the mythical narrative. Its most recognisable example is arguably provided by the stories of Persephone and of Orpheus, which weave in their many incarnations throughout the whole classical period. Because the myth stems from two most basic cognitive elements directly determining life in the early human cultures, i.e. the change of the seasons and the existence of afterlife, virtually all known early civilisations possess an equivalent katabatic myth of descent and some consequent mental notion of a chthonic landscape.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Foust 2008: 53-63; Bednarek 2001: 38-39.

The present argument is designed to be concerned solely with the narrower and more accessible definition of *katabasis*, which considers the topos as an element of the heroic narrative. It must, however, be constantly borne in mind that the reason for the enduring relevance and narrative vitality of his particular epic convention is its mythical weight which codifies its importance as part of the most basic human response to mutability, mortality and the sense of direction in individual existence.

Now the accessibility of the literary notion of *katabasis* means merely that one may discuss the use of the motif in literary texts of the epic genre which have either been produced in the literate cultural environment, or have descended to us as extant, recorded examples of oral texts. Consequently, it means that with some safety we may for the most part rely on the tools of literary scholarship to yield some tangible results in the wake of the discussion of this complex issue. What is also, however, immediately visible is that the multifarious incarnations of the motif of *katabasis* in epic literary texts created in European culture pose in themselves a substantial challenge. This situation is in itself the result of the fact that the very nature of the genre of the epic entails that we mostly deal with a set of highly individual texts reflecting the specific historical situation of their composition, as well as the unique approach of their composers to the ancient literary tradition. Since *katabasis* is arguably, of all epic conventions, the most sensitive to the question of spirituality, its evolution is also inseparably related to the monumental cultural transformation brought about by the emergence of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> As the growth of the new religion proved a catalyst for the already well-advanced process of transition from the oral to the literate culture, it made a decisive impact upon the communal perception of history, the sense of tradition as well as the underlying notions of the afterlife and the spacial concept of the underworld which are automatically incumbent upon them.

The present argument will aim at shedding some light on the role the motif of *katabasis* plays in two most important literary works of the last century which make use of the heroic mode and consequently make extensive use of the conventions of the mode's two principal exponent genres: the epic and the romance. In the course of the following discussion we shall thus compare two very individual modern heroic narratives: J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* with respect to the role which *katabasis* plays in their overall narrative structure and the way in which it reflects some of the fundamental spiritual context of the respective authors' work.

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<sup>2</sup> The argument is much indebted to the study of Foust 2008: 97-152.

*THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Turning our attention to Tolkien's monumental design, we first need to make some comment on the overall structure of the text with respect to the question of genre. While *The Lord of the Rings* has been rightly proclaimed to deserve the term "prose epic" by many critical voices, some studies have also demonstrated the extent to which, at a closer examination, the fabric of the text will exhibit features of a number of other literary genres which are employed, it seems, not so much in order to create the impression of variety (although this they also do), but primarily to underscore the sense of ascent, of the gradual progression of spiritual growth. This feature is indeed one of the cornerstones of Tolkien's artistic design, being reflected in the individual stories of most of the individual characters and most centrally in the context of the members of the Fellowship as they progress on their journey to become the collective embodiment of the principal facets of the incarnated Christ.

For this very reason it might actually be sometimes futile, or even counterproductive, to seek to arrive at an exhaustive picture of the multitude of literary genres, modes and motifs which may be discerned in the course of the narrative (as the otherwise remarkable study by Simonson, 2008 does) because if we refer most of them to their intertextual roots by putting genre history over mode implications,<sup>3</sup> we will arguably arrive at a relatively simple, but altogether grand design which may be in general described as a tripartite scheme incorporating first the conventions of the adventure novel and the picaresque tale, then ascending into the heroic narrative, beginning with the territory of the romance, to culminate finally in the realm of the epic.

Such design clearly underscores the dynamic character of Tolkien's work, which is an epic text in the sense that from its very beginning it creates an inexorable momentum which leads its characters onto the level of Christian heroism, gathering on the way all that had contributed to the emergence of the concept itself. In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien chooses to achieve the level of the epic, which in turn vests all the preceding journey through the various modes and genres in the heroic mantle.

As the mutual relationship of the epic and the romance is a frighteningly complex issue (and also one of which professor Tolkien was acutely aware) this overall design would be, of course, applicable for further, much more detailed analysis. Nevertheless, the recognition of the basic tripartite structure may in fact contribute to a much more lucid picture of the many elements and motifs which appear in the course of the narrative, not least of the motif of *katabasis*.

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<sup>3</sup> Thus the Shelob episode will keep the predominant intertextual link with the epic despite having traits of the Gothic mode in the imagery and the setting.

Quite apart from all that, it must be further added that another important element in the overall structure of Tolkien's text which has a direct bearing on the author's notion of *katabasis* is the dichotomy between the model of heroism inherited from the classical Antiquity and the Scandinavian cultures and the Christian conception behind the heroic quest.<sup>4</sup>

Ever since its appearance in the oral, primary epic the motif of *katabasis* held for the epic hero both the danger of derailing his quest by stalling him in the reminiscences of the past and the promise of finding a way of, so to say, dealing with the future. Thus in *The Odyssey* Odysseus receives in the underworld a glimpse of the timelessness and essentially meaningless eternity of the dead, in which it reflects the ontological anguish of the reality of the primary epic, on which C. S. Lewis commented once so memorably.<sup>5</sup> The epic hero receives here both some useful advice on the future that awaits him and also an apparent warning against losing the struggle for staying within time. In the Homeric universe eternity offers no hope and no consolation for the lost power of making an impact upon time and history and the inertia of the post mortem existence of the hungry shades only serves to show how little remains of the human being after it ceases to operate in the fourth dimension.<sup>6</sup>

While so much more is written into *katabasis* in the secondary epic with its conscious vision of linear history, the basic tension remains in force when we visit the underworld in the course of the *Aeneid* where the lure of looking back and losing oneself in the past still works against the unveiling weight of the future as the epic is gradually ever more anchored in progressive history. Alongside this process we may observe how the idea of moral censure now penetrates the underworld, adding much variety to its topography and bestowing a sense of nobility on those of its inhabitants who can boast of having pursued an ethical lifestyle.

The advent of the Christian outlook was most vividly encapsulated in the vision of the Harrowing of Hell, which was crystallised firmly by III c. AD. The new Christian model of the heroic not only propels the motif still more firmly into the future, but, still more importantly, it introduces a hitherto unknown model of heroism which actively remodels the past by reshaping the future. Here the visit to the underworld introduces a change to the structure and function of the underworld becoming now the ultimate register in the conception of epic heroism.

Having firmly in mind all the above let us now examine the role of the motif of *katabasis* in the overall structure of *The Lord of the Rings*. If we follow the proposed tripartite division whereby the genre of the romance gradually takes over

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<sup>4</sup> The following argument about the nature of the heroic quest in Tolkien and its relation to the question of genre is specifically inspired by and indebted to Auden 2004: 31-51; Basney 2004: 184-189; Chance 2004: 196-197, 208-209; Simonson 2008: 22-25; Chance 2001 (*The Lord...*): 128-138.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis 1942: 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> The argument about the primary and secondary epic draws upon the research of Raaflaub 2009: 55-70; Slatkin 2009: 320-323; Toohy 2010: 32-33.

from the picaresque to be then gradually superseded by first the classical and then the Christian epic, we will be able to recognise the existence of a katabatic episode corresponding to each of the three successive stages in the progressing narrative.

The first one of these stages extends from the beginning of the story until the company reaches the court of Elrond in Rivendell. Here we may observe how the standard of personal courage typical for the adventure novel (like facing Farmer Maggot) are being dwarfed as heroic mode is ushered in gradually through the ever closer confrontation with the Black Riders. Here one may speak of a sort of double *katabasis* assuming its place on both sides of the company's stay with Tom Bombadil (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. 112-140). Indeed the two episodes of the hobbits being sucked into Old Man Willow at the threshold of the Old Forest and the attack of the wights at Barrow-downs appear to be in more than one sense a complimentary pair.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the company submerged into the timelessness like that represented by the primary epic. Just as the Old Forest harbours the grudge and the corruption born out of ages spent, as it were, beyond history so the Barrow-wights are in fact representatives of the past which lost its relevance to the present and the future, a past which has been in a sense excluded from the living dimension and meaning of history, one would already be tempted here to say: its eschatological meaning. In this sense one may find a common denominator for the natural living organism like the Old Forest and the spirits of the representatives of the men of Westergesse, who, as Tom Bombadil explains, were morally good, but ultimately unsuccessful in the struggle against evil. The grudge which both seem to bear towards the living is not the outcome of their evil nature, but rather the inevitable result of being cast out of the dynamic dimension of time, time which is incessantly on its way towards an ultimate goal, of which neither the self-centred longevity of nature, nor the long destroyed civilisation can any more be a part.

As we may see in both cases it is the prelapsarian vitality of Tom Bombadil which provides a remedy for the beleaguered hobbits. On the one hand, this may be a surprising circumstance in the light of what we have just said, as Bombadil appears to remain very emphatically outside the main eschatological concerns and destinations in Middle-earth. It seems, however, that it is his seemingly unbounded primaeval vigour that is designed to counterpoise the sullen lifelessness of both the Old Forest and the Barrow-wights. This is because Tom Bombadil epitomises the primordial freshness of natural life which has no direct role in the linear course of history, but which nevertheless constitutes its vital formative ingredient as it is the vitality of the natural, biological life on which all other forms of life endowed with intelligence and spirituality rely in their progress through the linear course of history. To put it in a yet another way, Tom Bombadil exists outside

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<sup>7</sup> Compare comments on the episode in Chance 2001 (*Tolkien's Art...*): 154-155 and Simonson 2008: 140-148.

the linear dynamism of history; he does not sojourn in time, but in the primeval timelessness of nature.

On the other hand, both the Old Forest and the shadow spirits of the people of Westeros lost the doomed battle to stay within the flow of history where neither mere natural longevity, nor mere human heroism may now assure a permanent place.

Here we may well comment on the differences between the two katabatic episodes, for they are also important as in the case of the events of the Barrow-downs, in contrast to the passage through the Old Forest, the heroic dimension makes its first invasion into the adventure story. It is important that the heroic mode intrudes here upon the unveiling quest in its most unattractive form. The company of hobbits is subjected to an attack by doomed spectres of an alien civilisation whose heroic past has become an instrument of torture in afterlife. The heroic ideals which defined their civilisation at the times when it had remained within the flow of time and history turned now into a scourge as the spirits are frozen in their sense of spiritual injury clearly feeling they deserved better for, while they may not be damned, they are still not blessed nor redeemed. Thus in *The Lord of the Rings* the classical, pre-Christian heroic ethos is introduced to be gradually vindicated in a more spiritual perspective, and the *katabasis* on Barrow-downs is therefore so poignant as a warning. As Tom Bombadil puts it to the shaken and bewildered hobbits: "You've found yourselves again, out of the deep water." (p. 140) The notion of threat, of the sensation of being put off your course is here much more important than any notion of enlightenment or prophesy which was also an element in the classical katabatic episodes.

Moving on to the second stage of *The Lord of the Rings*, one dominated by the conventions of the interlaced romance, which is finally superseded by the epic around the time of the siege of Minas Tirith and the dramatic events in Cirith Ungol, we shall encounter the most elaborate example of *katabasis* in the whole of the text. With the passage through the Mines of Moria the classical heroic tradition of journey to the underworld is both most fully unveiled and also, in a sense, overcome in order that the company may move on to the final stage of their quest.<sup>8</sup> Here also the descent is not the Fellowship's decision, but rather comes out of a tacit acceptance of its inevitability. The very fact, however, that the passage through the Mines is the last option if the quest is to continue, given the company's failure to overcome the obstacles at the pass of Caradhras, is a poignant indication of the necessity of some kind of confrontation with the past inherent in *katabasis* so that the heroic progress would reach its destination (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp. 287-323). The intertextual, symbolic dimension of the Fellowship first collective confrontation with the underworld of history is now quite emphatic. We thus encounter an entrance not unlike the cave of Avernus, a Cocytus-like lake, which does not reflect the Sun and is shunned by all living

<sup>8</sup> Compare comments on the episode in Simonson 2008: 183-184; Stephen 2012: 219.

creatures. We even have the mandatory animal sacrifice as poor Bill is duly sent away into the inclement surroundings.

Most obviously, however, on entering the dark passage, we are in the mines of *memoria*, finding, on the one hand, so much of the past to remember (or in Virgilian terms: *memisse*) and on the other, receiving something to keep as an emphatic admonition to be aware of henceforth (like Virgil's *memorare/monere*).<sup>9</sup> First comes the confrontation with the heroic past, which is not, given the multi-ethnic make-up of the Fellowship, more like a part of one's own native heritage. It is also more a past of the direct eschatological flow of history. The Mines contain, first, the memory the enduring greatness of the civilisation of the Dwarves of the First Age, and, second, the duly heroic attempt to reclaim the place by the expedition under Balin. These seem to have more relevance to the ultimate meaning of history than the nigh-forgotten exploit of the First Men, but they still fail to overcome the mutability inherent in the fortunes of Middle-earthly history. The reasons for it may seem, however, to be less arbitrary than in the case of the dead civilisation at the Barrow-downs, for now the fall of the Dwarves in the times of Durin, and then in the times of Balin, may be more clearly attributed to specific moral shortcomings. Both the greed of the first inhabitants of Khazad-dûm and the foolhardiness of the attempt to rebuild the former glory and access the remaining treasures conducted by Balin resulted in the awakening of the Balrog of pride and the ultimate destruction of the civilisation. The exploits and achievements of the ancient race of the dwarves have generated enough heroic spirit to have an assured place in the universal history of Middle-earth, but the context is still that of warning, echoing Anchises' *memento*. The history of the fortune of the Dwarf civilisation in Moria serves thus to illustrate the sheer power and ruthlessness of the fortunes of history, but it is this time a heritage to be learned, accepted and reconciled with, rather than simply shunned and avoided.

In this very context it is important to discern the symbolism behind the inscription the company find on the tomb of Balin and the chronicle found among the wreckage of the dwarves' last stand in the Chamber of Records. The choice of place for the final confrontation in the desperate struggle of dwarves to keep out the orcs is obviously not accidental and the scene must be treated as one of many in *The Lord of the Rings* when the contrastive dichotomy between the written and the spoken word is clearly underlined. While the spoken spell encapsulating the idea of a "friend" in the language of culture and civilisation still possesses the power to lay open the entrance to the Mines, the stony written pronouncement of Balin as the "the lord of Moria" can only echo with the senses of unintentional irony. Similarly the written chronicle can only produce a faint and distorted, fragmentary echo of the heroism of the past, together with the confusion, drama and tragedy with which it has become inseparably bound here. In a secondary world where

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<sup>9</sup> Based on Puntam 2009: 460-461. Compare also Foust 2008: 84-122.

magic is the operational power conveying the spiritual dimension onto the material this contrast must be felt with unique emphasis.

The heritage of the past must also this time be overcome, and here we encounter the first major glimpse of Christian heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*. The confrontation between Balrog and Gandalf constitutes the first moment where the motif of introducing a lasting change to the constitution of the underworld brings in with itself the whole weight of the Christian tradition as, with the actions of Gandalf, the Christian notions of sacrifice, death, atonement and resurrection are brought into Tolkien's secondary world.<sup>10</sup>

This dimension of what happens in the Mines of Moria prepares us for the third and final example of *katabasis* in the epic. It may indeed be said that in riding the Paths of the Dead under the Haunted Mountain of Dwimorberg Aragorn takes over where Gandalf left off in Moria as the episode is clearly the Middle-earthly equivalent of the Harrowing of Hell and as such it greatly contributes to the notion of Christian heroism instilling and transforming the epic dimension of the final stages of the confrontation with Sauron (*The Return of the King*, pp. 756-773). Here we encounter the messianic component which is the cornerstone of the Christian linear scheme of universal redemption.<sup>11</sup>

The very existence of the eerie underworld under the hill of Erech is a violence against Nature created in the wake of a sin of the past. In this sense it is similar in its unnatural character to the ghostly world of the forlorn Dwarfish kingdom for it stands as a reminder of a breaking of a covenant as the King of the Mountain People breaks his promise to help Isildur, the king of Gondor in his war with Sauron. The underworld which Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas descend to is thus not an eternal part of the order of nature, but, again like the Mines of Moria, it has its origins in an aberration of history. Its primary terror consists in the fact that it makes the presence of death felt where it should have no place, where it lingers unnaturally as a consequence of a breaking of a promise caused by an inordinate love for life and a desire to keep it at the expense of loyalty and duty. Hence the monstrous, unnatural fear that seizes Gimli – the focaliser in the scene of the passage under the Mountain – is not a fear of death as such, but of the despair of transgression which permeates the dark cave the company journeys through. It is so because the inhabitants of the underworld of Erech are in a worse position than the dwarves fallen in Moria as they remain victims of their own moral transgression, not of merely misguided and futile heroism.

In contrast to the Mines, however, the disorder of the past may be now rectified for the curse laid on the oath-breakers also contains a promise of atonement at an appointed time in the future and among the many Christ-like attributes of Aragorn

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of the scene see Szyjewski 2004: 337; Rorabeck 2008: 58-59.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Chance 2001 (*Tolkiens'...*): 173-174.

the capacity to arrange for the termination of a potentially eternal punishment of those damned through their own misdeeds stands out prominently.

Moreover, the Mountain people are not only released from the bond of the past – they are also made to play a vital part in the present wars with evil and thus contribute to the future in a way not to be found in the case of Moria, where the function of a reminder and a warning of the past seems to be the primary objective. Here it is the release of those noble, but flawed into the future that becomes the central imperative.

With Aragorn's passage through the Haunted Mountain we reach one of the most crucial pinnacles of Christian heroism in *The Lord of the Rings* and the episode provides final epic *katabasis*, anchored now firmly in the Christian context and firmly attached to the linear progress of history, firmly wrenched out of the doomed finality of the past.

#### A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

If we now move on to the discussion of what is arguably the only contemporary work of high fantasy which rivals Tolkien's work in terms of scope and sophistication of design we shall meet the familiar generic constituents which previously provided the building block for Tolkien's grand vision, but their arrangement and mutual relationships are quite different. While in *The Lord of the Rings* we encountered the genres ascending as they illustrated a progressive quest for the ultimate form of heroism, in George R.R. Martin's saga we observe the heroic traditions of the classical epic and the medieval romance engaged in a complex dialogue in which they as much feed off as destroy each other. Crucially in the case of *A Song of Ice and Fire* the ontological context is not determined by an exegesis of Christian eschatology, but rather looks towards an ethically neutral quasi-providential design based on a cyclical scheme directed at a restoration of universal order and balance in Martin's secondary world.

Such an arrangement is for the most part indebted to medieval socio-political theories, but is not supported here by an underlying spiritual framework. Instead it allows Martin to relish in exploiting the religious and cultural variety in a dialectic polyphony of intertwined points of reference. Within this sort of design the romance and the epic conventions also intertwine in contrastive dichotomy, whereby the epic slowly, but steadily overwhelms the course of the interlaced romance as it spends and exhausts its traditional openness into a total disintegration of the characters and the narrative framework.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this aspect see Gouen 2012: 205-209, and Kokot 2014: 49-70.

The motif of *katabasis* is predictably enough interwoven into this overriding model and it is made to underscore the contrast between the doomed fatality of the romance against the growing vitality of the epic, as Daenerys' quest gradually gains in prominence against the context of the civil war which nearly obliterates the social fabric of the kingdom of Westeros.

Given George R.R. Martin's penchant for fine reformulation of traditional motifs comprising the heroic narrative it will probably come as no surprise that we first encounter *katabasis* at the very beginning of the interlaced romance narrative where it becomes interpolated into the exposition of the characters. Thus we follow king Robert Baratheon into the catacombs under the castle of Winterfell where the body of his erstwhile betrothed Lyanna Stark is located (*A Game of Thrones*, pp. 39-48).

After a time taken to give in to the reminiscences concerning the events of the rebellion against the House Targaryen king Robert chooses the moment to offer lord Eddard Stark the post of the King's Hand vacated in the wake of the death of Jon Arryn.

The poignancy of this scene is the result of the fact that it faces both into the past and into the future and in both ways it faces into death. What we encounter here is the kind of situation which did not ever happen to the characters involved in the heroic quest in Tolkien's epic. Here we observe how the spectre of the past with all the baggage of longing, grief and hatred which becomes impossible to appear by any action in the present together with all the cruelty of the sense of unfulfilled possibilities, abandoned alternatives and the might-have-beens of a sheerly accidental nature are unleashed upon the disintegrating monarch to drag him out of the present deep into a mental underworld reminiscent of the mixture of despair and resentment of the pitiful shades met by Ulysses in Homer's epic. Because, however, king Robert is still alive and at least nominally in power, he succeeds in inadvertently causing the death of his most loyal friend, bringing annihilation upon his house and years of war, chaos, destruction and suffering upon the land he rules.

What we witness here is the chief ingredient in any conception of heroism – the responsibility for the future, which is traditionally the driving force behind the quest in the epic as well as in the romance, being surrendered and dissipated early on as, during his katabatic descent the king succumbs to the fatal dimension of history with all its deadly capacity for destruction.

Importantly this example of Martin's reformulation of *katabasis* is deprived of any overtly supernatural elements. Instead we are steeped in the aura of tragic premonition which perfectly fulfils the function of prophesy, so inextricably associated with the classical form of *katabasis*. This circumstance is a very important factor in Martin's use of the motif because within the interlaced romance structure of the Westeros section of the narrative the katabatic episodes will be mostly organised upon variations of this particular element. This is for the most part the result of the fact that in *A Song of Ice and Fire* we do not see a universal providential design

equivalent to the Christian eschatological framework of the primary world, as was the case in *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead we encounter here a dialectical mosaic of visions of the future reflecting the varied perspectives and knowledge of the individual characters. This offers ample opportunity for exploiting the element of prophesy in the context of traditional narrative models.

A perfect example of such a use of the motif of descent is the scene when Arya Stark embarks on an exploration of the dragon cellars of the Red Keep which causes her to accidentally overhear a clandestine conversation between Illyrio and Varys (*A Game of Thrones*, pp. 339-350). The scenery of the dark forgotten cellars filled with the skeleton heads of Targaryen dragons provides in fact a perfect setting for a katabatic journey to receive guidance and warning for the future. The conversation which Arya overhears clearly provides both, but, as Arya is too young and unable to understand the true import of what she hears and her father light-heartedly dismisses it, the chief effect of the episode is one of irony.

In a more profound sense the scenes in Winterfell and the Red Keep serve to stress the inadequacy of the romance characters involved in the politics of Westeros to rise to the requirements of the heroic epic, and effectually both scenes are instances of failure of the central characters to grasp the epic sense of history which would be required for them to play a part in the unveiling epic design.

As the universal destruction overwhelms the continent so the motif of *katabasis* reappears occasionally with the evident aim to underscore the disintegration of the world of Westeros. The most symptomatic example may again be found in Arya's interlaced narrative strain. If one takes a look at Arya's sojourn with the Brotherhood Without Banners in the Riverlands we may observe how the key elements of a classic *katabasis* are made use of to stress the doomed decadence permeating Westeros in the wake of Lannister victory. As the boundary between life and death is somehow ineffectually but ominously breached in the person of Beric Dondarrion – an undead champion of a long-deceased king on an endless quest with no apparent destination, the hideout of the Brotherhood in the Hollow Hill becomes the scene of a failed attempt at moral judgement as Sandor Clegane wins his trial by combat (*A Storm of Swords*, vol. I, pp. 489-501). When time comes for the prophesy, an old woman of mysterious pedigree named Ghost of High Heart delivers her ominous revelations on top of the Hill in full exposure to the inclement weather. All in all the episode appears to mark the utmost disintegration of a literary motif which reflects the hopelessness of romance narrative at this stage (*A Storm of Swords*, vol. I, pp. 316-329).

It is against this context that we may follow a series of katabatic episodes weaved into the narrative strain connected with the person of Bran Stark. It becomes clearly visible here that the motif reappears to mark a consecutive stage of Bran's quest for the elusive entity referred to as "the three-eyed crow". First, we have here Bran, together with his brother Rickon, Hodor and the Reed siblings hiding in the crypts under Winterfell waiting for the opportune moment to slip unnoticed from

the castle which remains overrun by the foraging expedition of troops from the Iron Islands (*A Clash of Kings*, pp. 698-708). As Bran and Rickon are presumed and universally proclaimed dead at this stage their stay in the underworld of the crypts may be seen as a kind of rites of passage, and as such it is of an altogether different character than the previously discussed scene featuring king Robert and lord Eddard, which takes place at the very same spot.

The element of the rites of passage is even more emphatically present in another katabatic episode as Bran and the company pass through the hidden entrance under the Wall ushered in by Samwell Tarly and escorted by the supposedly undead Coldhands (*A Storm of Swords*, vol. II, pp. 194-213). Here, despite the overtly Dantesque feel of the episode, the overall mood is still rather one of positive expectation, not ominous threat, or despondent gloom as it brings the travellers closer to the destination of the quest.

The quest itself terminates with Bran's descent into the underground habitation of the Children of the Forest where he finally meets Lord Bryden and learns at first hand the true meaning of most of what has been happening to him since his tragic fall from a tower during the visit of king Robert (*A Dance with Dragons*, pp. 168-187). Here it is most important to see, against the context of the Arya episodes, how the idea of a descent into the past becomes reunited with the idea of a constructive prophesy, i.e. one which allows a space for the individual contribution, however passive it might seem, in the universal order of things. Paradoxically, however, the contribution also entails a permanent sacrifice as the knight errant learns during his *katabasis* that his quest has all the time been for the underworld itself. By being offered the destiny of becoming a greenseer, Bran Stark is to find a refuge from both the horrors of war, and his own physical deprivation. Bran's quest is heroic in the sense that it is to end in a sacrifice of being lost in the greater reality into which the underworld of the Children of the Forest is an entrance. The sheer scope as well as anonymity of the sacrifice creates a completely new context for the meaning of *katabasis* in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

All the above mentioned examples provide the necessary context for the discussion of the text's most prominent *katabasis*, i.e. Daenerys' visit in the House of the Undying (*A Clash of Kings*, pp. 508-516). The episode stands out as an emphatic example of the full force of the secondary epic concept of destiny which asserts itself upon the texture of the narrative. It also becomes a sole case when the visit to the underworld does not overwhelm the hero, or serve to highlight the sense of defeat, or the prospect of destruction.

The stay of the desperate leader of a sorry remnant of a kalasaar in the opulent and exotic city of Quarth appears to mark a low point in the epic progress of the would-be ruler of Westeros as she strives to have her political aspirations recognised by a ruling elite of a foreign city. Against this context Daenerys' search for guidance from a reclusive company of semi-supernatural creatures residing among the forbidding surroundings in a place supposedly located beyond regular

time and space may be seen as a resolute reassertion of the character's epic ambition. The episode is thus one in which the presence of the supernatural element is the strongest of all its counterparts throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It is also the one most clearly built around the sense of an unveiling heroic destiny and in this context one cannot think of a closer literary counterpart of the *Aeneid* as Daenerys is structurally a direct and close counterpart of the Virgilian epic hero and the classical model of heroic quest.

This tradition is, however, interwoven with the pattern reminiscent of the Harrowing of Hell as Daenerys' visit causes a complete destruction of the underworld. The exact implications of this are much less definite than what the tradition behind the pattern normally allows because, given the absence of any overt providential design propped up against a recognised form of spirituality, we are left only with the recurrent patterns of the socio-political and historical processes governing the changing fortunes of kingdoms to make sense of the outcome of Daenerys' stay in the House of the Undying, or of the series of visions she is presented with.

Indeed the indeterminate nature of the vision the Undying are able to conjure is the most important element in defining the nature of Daenerys' quest and the concept of heroism behind the character. The failure of the Undying to articulate a coherent prophesy or to provide any valid indication as to the course of the future is most palpable as the visions they conjure amount to little more than a chaotic mixture of familiar images of the past and cryptic glimpses of the various possible courses of the future. Despite this, Daenerys' descent is not to be viewed as futile because it evidently is meant to indicate how much of the possible course of the future depends upon her own action which the Undying are no able to control or affect.

It is on these very foundations that the aura of heroism and epic significance of Daenerys' person and quest are subsequently made to rest. It seems to indicate the extent to which Daenerys' quest is not governed by the sheer force of an uncommon personality, aided, but not determined, by the circular course of history reflecting the universal tendency of both the world of Nature and human societies to periodically revert upon the state of order.

Apparently this providential tension is responsible for the destruction of the place as the possibility of a substantial reformulation of the future which Daenerys' quest entails proves somehow too much to bear for the creatures whose unnatural longevity seems to draw upon whatever remains somehow unaffected by the progress of time and history. Indeed the most recognisable vision she encounters in the House of the Undying – the final moments of King Aegon II and the Red Wedding seem to illustrate the unpredictable nature of history's turning points of which Daenerys' visit may be seen as an example.

Thus, typically for Martin the underworld does not successfully communicate any valid prophesy to the epic hero. Instead we are made to witness another textual paradox as the epic prophesy Daenerys might have hoped for is delivered to her

by the elusive figure of the “shadowbinder” Quaithe in a busy Quarth marketplace during a performance of a street magician.

It seems indeed that Martin’s constant reformulations of the motif of *katabasis* are a logical outcome of the detailed, almost surgical examination of the various facets constituting the concept of heroism which takes place throughout *A Song of Ice and Fire*. While in Tolkien’s epic we have witnessed a gradual progression towards a ready-made concept and model of heroism, in Martin the concept itself undergoes a dissection illustrated by the fate of the individual characters, and consequently instead of a steady, if sometimes dramatic, progression we are made to observe a dialectic interplay between various modes of heroism as reflected in the multitude of literary motifs and genres which are made use of in the course of the story.

The differing use of the motif of *katabasis* is a key element in the assertion, but also in the re-evaluation of the heroic ideal which permeates, albeit in quite divergent ways, both of these epic works.

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