Balogné Bérces, Katalin – Kaščáková, Janka – Kačer, Tomáš (eds.),
Crossing borders between countries, scholars, and genres:
Commemorating the late Kathleen E. Dubs. Ružomberok: Verbum.
ISBN 978–80–561–1171–0 (print), ISBN 978–80–561–1172–7 (online)

1.

The Corruption of the Best is the Worst: Saruman as an Academic and a Priest

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Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien's life and work display many dichotomies and tensions, which make the study of his oeuvre all the more fascinating. The most obvious and most frequently commented on are the clash between his love of predominantly pagan traditions and his devout Catholicism; and between his admiration of Scandinavian mythologies full of violence and sexuality and his own very proper sensibilities. The scholarly work of recent decades also demonstrates that many of the writers, such as Shakespeare (Croft 2007), or traditions, such as French language and literature (Flieger 2014; Smith 2017), or modernism (for example Jarman 2016),[1] that he often openly criticized and rejected, still influenced his writing, and that he is, as Dennis Wilson Wise, commenting on Tolkien's background in the Classics, aptly put it, "a wider and deeper writer than even we Tolkienists have realized" (Wise 2016, 33).

This paper deals with yet another set of tensions informing his work, based on the example of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1993), and particularly on the character of Saruman. Tolkien's distrust and dislike of science and technology, especially when it was contributing to the destruction of the English countryside he loved so much, is a well-documented fact that found expression in many different moments of his books. What is, however, less obvious and not so often commented on, is that Tolkien, an Oxford university don, scholar and lifelong lover of education, infused his novel with uneasiness about the dangers of learning. Furthermore, as a devout Catholic, he nevertheless created a character that seems to comment on the negative practices of the Church and its highest representatives. As this paper argues, Saruman, who is often seen as

[1] Jarman argues that similarly to T.S. Eliot and other modernists, "Tolkien's novel responds to the culture shock felt by many in the early twentieth century. *The Lord of the Rings* pits a poetic and metaphorical system of language against a more Modern language of disorientation and shows the poetic system to be more powerful" (Jarman 2016, 153), and claims that there is a "strong relationship between [Tolkien's] work and that of the other modernists; similar to Eliot's attempts in *The Wasteland* to stabilize modern culture through his use of the grail myth, Tolkien sought to reinstate a cultural and linguistic touchstone by reuniting myth and language" noting "a linguistic upheaval creating a rift between" the languages of poetry and that of science (ibid., 157).

the "most contemporary figure in Middle earth" (Shippey 2002, 76) with a "mind of metal and wheels" (III.4, 462), could thus also be read as both an academic (a teacher) and a priest, in both cases an embodiment of the dark side of these two vocations. It further elaborates that to understand Saruman's downfall and Tolkien's view of it, it is necessary to discuss the various kinds of knowledge as presented in the Bible, the limits and correct motivation of the pursuit of knowledge expressed in the opposing medieval concepts of *studiositas* and *vana curiositas*, as well as Tolkien's views on rhetoric and sophistry, as illustrated in Saruman's speeches. Finally, it demonstrates how this interpretation finds further support in the metaphorical meaning of Saruman's residence, the tower of Orthanc, in the ring of Isengard.

The Dangers of Wanting to Know

Saruman, together with Gandalf, Radagast and other two unnamed wizards arrived in Middle-earth during the Third Age, around the time when the Rings of Power were forged (Tolkien 1998, 503–4). They were referred to as *Istari*, Wizards, but were, in fact, *Maiar*, that is to say, angelic beings supposed to help the Free Peoples fight the evil Sauron (another Maia) and his supporters. According to Tolkien, the word *Istari* means "those who know" (Carpenter 2006, 202) and he translated them as "'wizards' because of the connexion of 'wizard' with *wise* and so with 'witting' and knowing" (Carpenter 2006, 207; emphasis in original). Their status as angelic beings, emissaries of Valar and possessors of superior knowledge, however, does not make them immune to evil and they too can fall. The greatest danger for them is impatience "leading to the desire to force others to their own good ends, and so inevitably at last to mere desire to make their own wills effective by any means" (Carpenter 2006, 237).

A crucial point that Tolkien made several times is that these emissaries were not to take on the task themselves and overpower Sauron with their supernatural powers, but were supposed to "*train*, *advise*, *instruct*, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance *with their own strengths*" (Carpenter 2006, 202; emphasis added), which makes them the equivalent of both teachers and, due to their connection to the divine, also priests.

Both teachers' and priests' professions are in different ways connected to knowledge and the search for truth; therefore, these concepts and the approaches to them are pivotal in this discussion. While our modern world and academia seem to view knowledge as the ultimate goal and essentially good, in spite of all the historical examples that prove otherwise, the very core of Christianity is based on the dichotomy of appropriate and inappropriate knowledge, the good and the forbidden fruit. The problem does not lie in knowing as such, but wanting to know too much, in the wrong way or

in the wrong circumstances. In the Bible, the danger attached to knowledge is inescapable, expressed metaphorically in the Tree of Knowledge that led to the downfall of humankind. By extension, knowing becomes the synonym for having a sexual encounter which, outside of strictly set boundaries, is a cardinal sin. While Tolkien studiously avoids sexuality in his work, the question of the necessary limits of knowledge is one of the leitmotifs of *The Lord of the Rings*. While in the Garden of Eden the instructions were clear and unequivocal: not eating from just one of many trees in the garden of Eden; the situation after the Fall became much more complicated. As a punishment for breaking the rule, for wanting to know too much, humankind no longer has the benefit of a clear answer; it is plagued with insecurities and has to constantly wonder about boundaries. Those potentially most in danger of making the fatal step too far are those closest to the source, or who go the furthest, testing the limits of knowledge: the Church officials and academics. As Benjamin Saxton argues, for the Wizards in *The Lord of the Rings*, "the space between wisdom and folly, salvation and destruction, is razor-thin" (Saxton 2013, 176).

Studiositas, *Curiositas* and The Arts of the Enemy

It becomes clear very early on that one of the main reasons for Saruman's downfall was his dangerous "specialization". As Gandalf first explains to Frodo, still unaware of Saruman's corruption, "[t]he lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making" (I.2, 47). Since the art of making the Rings of Power was something that the Elves learned from Sauron while he still pretended to be their ally, and in spite of the three Elven Rings having never been touched by him and being used for good, it is now considered as the art of the enemy and as Elrond points out during the Council "[i]t is perilous to study *too deeply* the arts of the Enemy, for good or for ill" (II.2, 258; emphasis added). According to Wise, "Tolkien's distaste for Saruman partially stems from a Christian tradition long distrustful of the pursuit of worldly knowledge and power, especially as revealed by the medieval legend of Dr. Faustus" (Wise 2016, 8). Indeed, the medieval philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine, just like their Classical predecessors and inspirers, had incessantly pondered the proper conditions of the quest for knowledge, though unfortunately they did not always agree, and often arrived at many different conclusions.[2] In the context of the discussion of Saruman versus Gandalf and their approach to knowledge, it is useful to mention the two opposing notions of *studiositas* and *curiositas* (or *vana curiositas* – empty curiosity), often contemplated by medieval

[2] For a detailed discussion of the topic, see Pappin (2014).

philosophers, where the former is a virtue encompassing the proper rules applied in the search of useful knowledge, while the latter often represents either unworthy or forbidden knowledge, going "too far" and resulting in complications and danger. *Curiositas* in the medieval period is seen as a vice; indeed, as Gladden J. Pappin points out, our modern notion of curiosity as being good and a starting point of research dates back to the 19th century and "[c]ritiques of medieval teachings against *vana curiositas* are commonplace among partisans of modern science" (Pappin 2014, 313).

However, the implication of the novel is that going into the dangerous territory – that is, studying the arts of the enemy – is to a certain point beneficial and necessary. The problem is determining where this "certain point" of no return is, and how to make sure one does not overstep. That even the wise do not have a definite answer is also expressed in Elrond's qualification of the necessity of not going "too deeply" into the territory, which is overly vague and general. As Wise (2016) interestingly argues, both Elrond and Gandalf expected and benefited from Saruman's findings and apparently had no problem with them until Saruman betrayed them and their cause. He thus perceives "Elrond's *post hoc* condemnation" of Saruman's research "as potentially hypocritical" (ibid., 8). I see it simply as the benefit of hindsight. Elrond and Gandalf themselves are surely not ignorant of the arts of the enemy either, and are aware that theirs is a situation in which the pursuit of knowledge is key. However, its positive or negative outcomes largely depend on the art of self-moderation, possibly anchored in one's own personal morality but with a great potential for mistakes. They, just like the medieval philosophers, constantly oscillate between the pursuit of necessary knowledge and the wisdom of knowing when to stop. As Pappin (2014) argues: "Not till one has access to the highest or most crucial knowledge would one rule out inferior sources of knowledge or the knowledge of inferior things" (ibid., 325), which could be paraphrased as not until one goes too far would one know it is too far. And for the knowledge seeker, in this case Saruman, at that point, it might be too late to realize the problem and back off with impunity.

The importance of knowing when to stop and the repercussions of going too far are illustrated by other examples in *The Lord of the Rings*; Saruman is not the only one who oversteps with serious consequences. The industriousness of the Dwarves results in the creation and expansion of the Realm of Khazad-dûm or Dwarrowdelf, as well as many subsequent centuries of prosperity. It all ends in the Third Age, when, in search of the precious mithril, they wake the Balrog who then kills their king and brings about the destruction of the beautiful kingdom that turns into the Black Pit of Moria. While the appendix A/III "Durin's Folk" gives just dry facts about this disaster without any trace of judgement (1046), the version Gandalf tells the hobbits when they enter Moria

is slightly different. The differences, moreover, are significant, and give his view of the reason why it happened: "The Dwarves tell no tale; but even as *mithril* was the foundation of their wealth, so also it was their destruction: *they delved too greedily and too deep*, and disturbed that from which they fled, Durin's Bane" (II.4, 309; emphasis added). Here too it is suggested that delving, whether actual or metaphorical (as a pursuit of knowledge), is acceptable only within certain limits and with the right motivation, which is neither greed nor pride.[3]

Greed is also suggested in a comparable situation which, however, does not happen in the past, but is part of the story of the quest and is a major tipping point. When Pippin is tempted to look into the *palantír* Gríma Wormtongue dropped from Orthanc, the narrator describes him acting "like a greedy child stooping over a bowl of food, in a corner away from others" (III.11, 578). Gandalf finds his curiosity natural but condemns his inability to stop himself when he knows it is wrong. Gandalf insists Pippin knew what he was doing was wrong and implied it was within his ability to resist: "You knew you were behaving wrongly and foolishly; and you told yourself so, though you did not listen" (III.11, 584). Both the Dwarves as a nation and Pippin as an individual, however, do not end up the same way as Saruman, and that is because they are able to recognize their mistakes and learn from them. This ability is arguably also related to the fact that they listen to others and their advice. In Pippin's case, it is Gandalf who explains the situation and makes him see the error of his ways. Saruman, on the contrary, makes sure he does not have anybody like that around him; he isolates himself and keeps his actions and mistakes hidden from everybody, and it is highly unlikely in any case that he would listen to advice and admonitions.

One of the most admirable messages of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, is that even mistakes, in a world where a divine power is present, can lead to good outcomes for those who keep faith and remain on the right path. It is clear that without Saruman's greed for power, Pippin and Merry would never have reached Fangorn and roused the Ents against him; because of the battle with the Balrog, Gandalf dies and is sent back as a more powerful Wizard. And finally, thanks to Pippin's *vana curiositas*, Gandalf, as he himself admits, is "saved […] from a grave blunder" as he was considering looking into the *palantír* himself, which would have had much more serious consequences (III.11, 581).

[3] I find it highly ironic that one of the most overused expressions by AI text generators when attempting to generate academic texts is "delve into", while AI is clearly an instance of where the danger of going too far and delving too deep seems to be our modern version of Saruman's plight.

Seeing is (Sometimes) Deceiving

The Seven Seeing Stones or the *palantíri* add a further dimension to the discussion of the search for knowledge. The sense of sight was also very important for medieval philosophers. Thomas Aquinas, for example, believed that it "gives us more perfect knowledge than the other senses" (Pappin 2014, 327). St. Augustine, however, also sees the negative aspects of our use of sight. According to him, "the eyes are paramount among the senses in acquiring information" but we have a tendency to use it not only for good but also for "morbid curiosity" (for example looking at dead bodies or disasters) as well as for seeking out irrelevant information (Pappin 2014, 70–71). All this is expressed in Gandalf's interpretation of what happened to Saruman, when he finally puts all the pieces of the puzzle together after Pippin looks into the stone of Orthanc:

> Each *palantír* replied to each, but all those in Gondor were ever open to the view of Osgiliath. Now it appears that, as the rock of Orthanc has withstood the storms of time, so there the *palantír* of that tower has remained. But alone it could do nothing but see small images of things far off and days remote. Very useful, no doubt, that was to Saruman; yet it seems that he was not content. *Further and further* abroad he gazed, until he cast his gaze upon Barad-dur. *Then he was caught!* […] Easy it is now to guess how quickly the roving eye of Saruman was trapped and held; and how ever since he has been persuaded from afar, and daunted when persuasion would not serve.
>
> (III.11, 583; emphasis added)

Looking either from idle curiosity or to gain knowledge that would increase his power, Saruman is, yet again, seen as overstepping a boundary, going too far and falling into a trap. In this case, the *palantír* he owns works in a similar way as the One Ring he desires. Although not created with evil intentions and used for good for many years by the ones who originally designed them, Sauron rendered *palantíri* "sinister, and instruments of domination and deceit" (Tolkien 1998, 523). Thus for Saruman the *palantír* is dangerous because it offers power (in the form of knowledge) but it can also deceive him into interpreting what he sees in the wrong way. Furthermore, the *palantír* seems to "radiate" temptation the wise should know to resist. As the novel implies, it is natural for people to feel the compulsion to know and to experience even the things that are not good or healthy for them, yet it also suggests it is their duty to resist that temptation for their own good and the good of the others. Gandalf, Aragorn, Elrond, Galadriel and even Faramir refuse the temptation of the Ring and its promise of great power. But

Gandalf also has to resist the temptation of improper knowledge, *curiositas*, that he feels the moment he takes the *palantír* of Orthanc into his safekeeping:

> And how it draws one to itself! Have I not felt it? Even now my heart desires to test my will upon it, to see if I could not wrench it from him and turn it where I would – to look across the wide seas of water and of time to Tirion the Fair, and perceive the unimaginable hand and mind of Fëanor at their work, while both the White Tree and the Golden were in flower!
>
> (III.11, 584)

While what he would like to see is clearly fascinating to him, it is also absolutely useless and, as he understands, it is not a kind of knowledge he needs at that time and for his purposes. For that reason, he must suppress the desire and, unlike Saruman, he succeeds in this.

Rhetoric and the Hunger for Power

The desire for knowledge and the power that it brings, and the degree to which these are a motivating factor in Saruman's fall, are revealed relatively early on in his speech to Gandalf when he tricks him into coming to Orthanc:

> We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends.
>
> (II.2, 259)

This speech is fascinating not only because of its uncanny similarity to those of contemporary politicians (as noted by Shippey 2000, 76 and Ruud 2010, 142), but also because, as is the norm in dramatic monologues of this kind, what he hopes to convey and what he actually reveals are two very different things. Saruman not only turns to rhetoric to defend an indefensible position, but also reveals the reasons for his gradual yet, to Gandalf at least, surprising change. It was not merely his detailed study of the art of making of Rings, as noted by Elrond, nor the manipulation from Sauron via the *palantír*, as realized much later. There are other aspects that contribute to the picture. First of all, as many powerful people mistakenly believe, Saruman too thinks that the

rules for him are different to those for the "lesser" people.[4] Secondly, unlike any good teacher or priest, he turns his attention from his purpose and his students/people and starts thinking of himself only, justifying his stance by denouncing them as "weak or idle". Although the speech does not feature the usual "Is" of a self-centred man, Saruman does repeat "we" too many times and, as Gandalf correctly points out, "only one hand at a time can wield the One, and you know that well, so do not trouble to say we!" (II.2, 253) Gandalf's astute observation also exposes the last and most hidden reason why Saruman was doomed to fail. From the very beginning of the *Istari's* quest, he was jealous of Gandalf and, as Tolkien claims, this one-sided "rivalry turned at last to a hatred, the deeper for being concealed, and the more bitter in that Saruman knew in his heart that the Grey Wanderer had the greater strength, and the greater influence upon the dwellers in Middle-earth" (Tolkien 1998, 360). Saruman did not call Gandalf to Isengard to propose an alliance of a new kind, and probably not even to hinder his success in the battle against Sauron. He called him there to be a witness to his vindication and victory.

Though Saruman in his later stages, once he is revealed as the traitor and in league with Sauron, looks like a mad scientist and the representative of the abuse of science, he starts out more like a scholar in the humanities. As Aragorn describes him:

> Once he was as great as his fame made him. His knowledge was deep, his thought was subtle, and his hands marvellously skilled; and he had a power over the minds of others. The wise he could persuade, and the smaller folk he could daunt. That power he certainly still keeps. There are not many in Middle-earth that I should say were safe, if they were left alone to talk with him, even now when he has suffered a defeat. Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel, perhaps, now that his wickedness has been laid bare, but very few others.
>
> (III.9, 553)

This is a definition of a learned man, a great scholar who is so well educated that only those who are on the same level with him would be able to recognize potential falsehood or manipulation. The simple people are "daunted" by his knowledge and cowed by his bearing. And even though he is literally from the other world and the universe of *The Lord of the Rings* includes magic, his powers are not presented as supernatural, nor

[4] For a discussion of this phenomenon in several works of literature, including *The Lord of the Rings*, see Ellwood (1971).

even "hypnotic", which would still evoke some inexplicable abilities in most common people. Tolkien insists on him being simply "persuasive":

> Saruman's voice was not hypnotic but persuasive. Those who listened to him were not in danger of falling into a trance, but of agreeing with his arguments, while fully awake. It was always open to one to reject, *by free will and reason*, both his voice while speaking and its afterimpressions. Saruman corrupted the reasoning powers.
>
> (Carpenter 2006, 276; emphasis in original)

Eloquence, the art of speaking, seems to be one of the most essential tools of both a scholar and a priest, as they are in the habit of frequently speaking in public and being persuasive would appear to be a positive ability. It is, however, not as straightforward as that. Several scholars (Ruud 2010; Wise 2016; Chisholm 2019) have argued that Tolkien's background in the Classics is significantly reflected in *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in the representation of the ancient battle between philosophy and rhetoric, as embodied in the two wizards Gandalf and Saruman. What *The Lord of the Rings* proposes is that the truth is more important than the ability to express it well and impressively. Jay Ruud sees Saruman's speech to Gandalf in Orthanc as "Machiavellian in the worst sense of the word, in which the end justifies the means, and it is sophistry in the way only a skilled modern politician can perform it, disguising a wrong cause in fair words" (2010, 142). He also claims that great speeches are defined by the right motivation. According to him,

> Gandalf, with the power of certainty and of truth behind his words, may speak with authority in a style that inspires and moves men to virtuous action. Saruman, whose motives have come to include greed and power, intends by contrast to conceal the truth through his words, which in his case become a web of deceit glossed over by the appearance of truth.
>
> (Ruud 2010, 151)

Wise (2016) too shows the contrast between Gandalf and Saruman and their application of rhetoric: "Unlike with Saruman, the narrator barely shows Gandalf as having any effect on the many. Wisdom does not require rhetorical 'prettying up' because wisdom should speak for itself. Truth is, so it is implied, transparent and non-rhetorical" (ibid., 12). As he maintains, Saruman is not just a means "to critique modernity, indus-

trialization, or the like", he also represents the rhetor of the Classical debates, the one who is the opposite of those who "possess 'true' knowledge. They, therefore, have no desire to shape mere appearances or opinion (*doxa*) through subtle speech and cunning words". As he claims, "[t]hat path belongs only to the sophists, the rhetoricians, and the relativists. Saruman, in other words" (ibid., 2).

Chad Chisholm similarly maintains that "[f]or Gandalf, rhetoric is only a tool so that he can be the philosophic hero of Tolkien's world. This is in stark contrast to Saruman who becomes the archetypical Platonic representation of the Sophist Rhetor who places persuasion above all else, even truth" (Chisholm 2019, 91). In his view, Saruman does not use language "simply to *communicate* knowledge and ideas, but also to *construct and reconstruct his audience's* understanding of reality" (emphasis in original). Saruman as a Sophist thus "sees rhetoric as the means to power and is willing to deny or forsake truth in order to acquire it" (ibid., 98).

Tolkien's representation of Saruman thus suggests that rhetorical skill, although useful and certainly an advantage for both academics and priests, is not only of no use, but is even positively dangerous when not backed by wisdom, truth and adherence to the principles of professional integrity. This becomes obvious when Saruman, trying to deal with Théoden, Gandalf and their company under the windows of Orthanc, fails to make his speeches persuasive once his betrayal is uncovered and he cannot maintain his authority as his actions were not based on truth and genuine belief in what he was doing.

Of Robes and Their Colours

Even Saruman's external appearance, his clothing and its colour-coding, like those of his four fellow *Istari*, are reminiscent of the rituals of both academia and the Catholic Church. *Istari* wear long robes and their colours seem to point at their place in the hierarchy of the institution/order or at their respective specialties/fields of study. In academia, the different robes indicate different universities or schools, and sometimes also the academic's position within the hierarchy of the university (the rector's robes being the most ornate). The Catholic Church not only uses colours to distinguish between different ranks within the Church hierarchy, but also between different religious orders. And indeed, the three *Istari* present in the action of the novel each have a different specialty and could be perceived as belonging to different ranks or positions: Saruman's specialty is Ringlore, and he is white because he is the head of the order. Gandalf's field of study is Hobbit-lore, and Radagast's is nature. While Saruman's (and later Gandalf's) white robes might simply symbolize purity and goodness set against the darkness and blackness of the evil Sauron, it seems unavoidable to also take into account the glaring similarity between Saruman the White and the highest representative of the Catholic Church, the Pope. Both

are, to put it in Tolkien's words, the highest of their order, both wear rings as symbols of their authority and, most importantly, both are immediately recognizable for wearing white robes. While Tolkien despised allegory and would certainly refute any intention of this kind on his side, he did not live in a vacuum and would often, whether knowingly or unconsciously, fall back on what was intimately known to him. What is more, he gave his readers leave to apply their experience of the world to his works.

With respect to Tolkien, Saruman and the Catholic Church, Bossert (2006) offers a compelling analysis of the early twentieth century movement in the Church called Modernism (not to be confused with the wider cultural and literary movement of the same name) and its many connections to *The Lord of the Rings* and the character of Saruman. The proponents of Catholic Modernism were trying to reconcile Catholic faith with modern times and offered "the scholarly approach to religious history" (Bossert 2006, 55). They were perceived as full of pride and "denouncing the supernatural in the name of history and science" (ibid., 65). They were staunchly opposed by Pope Pius X, who thoroughly condemned them especially in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). As Bossert states, his "witch-hunt climaxed with *Sacrorum antistitum* [1910], an oath against Modernist philosophy to be taken by all Catholic clergy and theologians" (ibid., 53). Citing many examples, Bossert demonstrates how this movement in the Church was viewed as detrimental and how "*Pascendi's* descriptions of the Modernist aptly suit the figure of Saruman" (ibid., 62).

As a young man knowledgeable about the developments in the Catholic Church, Tolkien would have been well aware of this controversy and would have agreed in many respects with Pius X. Tolkien too would not have agreed with the weakening of the faith or the supernatural as for him faith and history were "inextricably entwined […] because history, like myth or any narrative, transmits the stories of the past. Pius X's Modernists weaken[ed] that transmission by using textual studies to show how Biblical variations indicate a change in the epistemological truth in order to suit a community's contemporary needs" (Bossert 2006, 58). As Bossert maintains, Saruman is a perfect image of a Modernist, as for him "history is a means to power, of finding the Ring for his own acquisition." In opposition to him, "Gandalf uses ancient lore to protect the world from its own undoing. As already seen in *The Hobbit*, the figure of Gandalf […], evangelizes on the value of the supernatural underpinnings of the real world" (ibid., 64).

It would seem that Bossert's argument disproves the idea of Saruman being the reflection of a Pope, since it was a Pope who fought against Modernism, and Tolkien seems to have been on his side. The Pope in question, however, died in 1914, and there were another five after him in Tolkien's lifetime, as well as more than two hundred in the past, who had almost certainly not all been paragons of virtue and saintliness. How-

ever, I do not in any way propose to view Saruman as a simplistic allegory of a particular Pope, but rather as an exploration of how pride, jealousy, impatience, desire for power and *vana curiositas* can affect those in high positions where their fall has greater impact and often devastating consequences. Apart from goodness and purity, the white colour they wear also symbolizes humility and simplicity and its "breaking" by Saruman is a metaphor of both his corruption and blindness caused by pride.

> "I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colours!"
> I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.
> "I liked white better," I said.
> "White!" he sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken."
> "In which case it is no longer white," said I. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom."
>
> (II.2, 252)

There are several very significant moments in Gandalf's retelling of what happened. First of all, Saruman, the rhetor could inspire us to read his colour change as symbolising his open-mindedness, his acceptance of different views and opinions, and perhaps also to different skills and competences. However, Gandalf points out that Saruman's robes *seemed* white but on closer inspection changed colour. That indicates that if Saruman wanted and when it served his purposes, he could still make people believe he had not changed and still wore white. Alternately, it could mean that only some people, those looking closely enough, literally and figuratively, could see the corruption and warn the others against it. From Gandalf's point of view, Saruman's change of colour indicates that he is unreliable, impossible to read and willing to change his appearance according to circumstances. Saruman, in simple words, betrays himself as a relativist.

This speech, as reproduced by Gandalf, however, also demonstrates that even good and uncorrupted people sometimes err in their quest for good or the truth. Gandalf's authoritative "he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" is almost as debatable as Saruman's belief in the superiority of all colours to white. At this moment, Gandalf unwittingly gives an example of the danger of a charismatic and wise man to those who are momentarily caught in his greatness. His statement sounds like it is or should become a maxim to be quoted often and taken to heart, but is far from unequivocally true. Even setting aside science and technology, which

Tolkien was so adamantly opposed to, and which often necessitates breaking (dissecting, deconstructing) in order to understand; humanities likewise do their own, albeit metaphorical, breaking (such as close reading) without which we would not be able to learn and grow. Gandalf's maxim, when qualified further, certainly does hold some measure of truth; for example, if he added that breaking a thing without good reason or noble purpose is bad, it would align with him condemning *vana curiositas*: destroying for no other purpose than knowing. As it stands, however, his assertion is highly controversial.

Orthanc as the Ivory Tower

Another facet of Saruman's corruption as expressed by colour symbolism – and a further reinforcement of the claim that Saruman epitomizes Tolkien's fear of the misuse of knowledge and misrepresentation of religion/faith – is connected with Saruman's chosen residence, the tower named Orthanc. The most obvious reading, that of a black tower symbolizing/reflecting negative phallic energy and ego, and the blackness of the mind and soul of its inhabitant, is one option, but neither the best nor the only one.

Orthanc is a fitting choice for many reasons: it has a strategic position guarding the Gap of Rohan, it is safe and easily protected, and it is an appropriate residence for a prideful man with a hunger for greatness. Furthermore, there are advantages related to its origins. It was not built by Saruman (hence the weakness of the symbolism of black), but the "builders of old" and their craft was such that even the eldest of the old that call Saruman young, the Ents, cannot damage or destroy its foundations: "It was fashioned by the builders of old, who smoothed the Ring of Isengard, and yet it seemed a thing not made by the craft of Men, but riven from the bones of the earth in the ancient torment of the hills." At the top of the tower, there "was a narrow space, and there upon a floor of polished stone, written with strange signs, a man might stand five hundred feet above the plain" (III.8, 541).

The foundations of Orthanc and the narrator's suggestion that the builders were aided by the elemental powers that caused Orthanc to be literally embedded in rock suggest the symbolical reading of the tower's foundations representing the pillars of knowledge or faith Tolkien would have considered strong and indestructible. The Ents' futile attempts to break the walls of Orthanc seem to resonate with biblical verse: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus's claim suggests that the foundations of the Church are set in rock, immovable and good, and that in spite of the "building's" current inhabitants, their flaws, crooked philosophies or religious blunders. Sim-

ilarly, the tower of Orthanc will withstand Saruman and be ready for new, hopefully more worthy occupants.

Further symbolical interpretations of the connection between knowledge, faith and corruption are uncovered when the etymology of the word Orthanc is taken into consideration. According to Tolkien, the word has double etymology: one is the meaning in the "language of the Mark of old" (rendered as Old English in *The Lord of the Rings*) and the other is Tolkien's invented language of the Elves, Sindarin. In the first, *Orthanc* means "Cunning Mind", which is true of both the original builders as well as of the present inhabitant of the tower. Furthermore, the old English *orþanc* as a noun means "original, inborn thought" or "a skilful contrivance or work, artifice, device, design" and as an adjective, it means "cunning, skilful". In the Elvish, it has, rather surprisingly, the quite un-Elvishly unpoetic and pedestrian meaning of "Mount Fang" apparently simply based on its appearance (Tolkien 2005, 243; Tolkien Gateway n.d.). In *Unfinished Tales* (Tolkien 1998), Christopher Tolkien states that the Sindarin translation of *Orthanc* is "forked height" (again referring to the shape of the top of the tower) that only "happens to coincide with the Anglo-Saxon word *orþanc* 'cunning device'" (ibid., 518).

The two seemingly random and coincidental meanings of "cunning" and "fang" are, however, not isolated, but wonderfully interconnected, especially when looking into the etymology and implications of the word "fang". According to the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on "fang": the meaning of "an instrument for catching and holding", "a noose or trap" (II.3) is recorded from the 16th century. Apart from "a canine tooth; a tusk" (II.4), there is also the obsolete meaning of "a claw or talon" (II.5). As a verb, it has the now obsolete meanings of "to lay hold of, grasp, hold, seize; to clasp, embrace" (1a) as well as the Old English meanings of "to take in a snare" (1b) and "to seize upon (booty); to catch, apprehend, get into one's power (a person); to capture (a city), to seize (lands, possessions) (1c) (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). Taking all these meanings into consideration, Orthanc emerges as an organic part of Saruman's power and downfall, not just as the setting, but also one of the reasons, or at least as an incentive for both. Saruman's cunning mind not only recognized the strategic position of the tower and the ring of Isengard, it also craved it as a fitting complement – a great residence for a great man. At the same time, however, it took him too far away from his original tasks and intentions, both literally ("five hundred feet above the plain") and metaphorically ("weak or idle friends"). He came to be too far from and above those whom he originally came to teach and rescue. Gandalf, on the contrary, remains with his feet firmly on the ground, constantly surrounded by those who are intellectually and in other ways below him. That is the only way he remains good and faithful, in spite of his inclination towards arrogance and impatience, which he shares

with Saruman. Saruman's corruption is thus caused not only by wanting to see/know too much, but also by detaching himself from the original purpose and from those who are lower in intellect and origin.

In contrast to Saruman, Gandalf is a great teacher because he recognizes that sometimes he needs to turn into a student and allow his charges to lead and inspire: "All wizards should have a hobbit or two in their care – to teach them the meaning of the world, and to correct them" (III.11, 585). While Saruman became too distant and proud to listen to and learn even from one equal to him.

That leads to another connotation of the etymology of Orthanc, or rather, of one of its meanings, Mount Fang. Fang is not only the reminder of the fact that Saruman grasped it and used it for his purposes, to catch and hold what he wanted, Gandalf included, it is also a white organic material very close in nature to the "tusks" which are made of ivory. Both fangs and tusks are of yellowish colour sometimes referred to as off-white, which again, is a link to Saruman's "not-exactly-white" robes, and the broken or corrupted white is famously connected to the greed of the colonial hunt for ivory.

With the help of this slight shift from fangs to ivory, Orthanc, in spite of its black colour (or maybe because of it too) suddenly emerges as another symbol connected to both academia and the Church, and the dangers of becoming too detached from the ordinary world and the simple life: the Tower of Ivory. To come full circle, it is linked to all three contexts of knowledge mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The first is the biblical knowledge, in the carnal sense in which it appears in the Song of Solomon: "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bathrabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus" (7:4). The second, representing the Catholic Church and the symbolism of virginity and purity embodied in the person of the Virgin Mary who is sometimes referred to as the Tower of Ivory. But lastly and most importantly, the "Ivory Tower" is the legendary symbol of the "state of sheltered and unworldly intellectual isolation" (Martin n.d.), most often connected to academia. It is sometimes believed to have been inspired by *Hawksmoor Towers* of Oxford University's All Souls' College, the University where Tolkien spent most of his professional life, but could very well apply metaphorically to the inaccessible palaces of Vatican that prevent their occupants from interacting with those whom they are supposed to serve and guide. The last meaning of the Tower of Ivory fittingly sums up Orthanc's contribution to Saruman's downfall. His pride, thirst for power and improper knowledge, jealousy and self-centredness were further aggravated by his detachment from reality and from those whom he, short-sightedly and to his own detriment, deemed unworthy and stupid.

Conclusion

The late Kathleen Dubs used to say that there are two kinds of teachers. One kind are those who give their best to their students and do not mind or even applaud when they eventually outshine them. The other kind are those who guard their knowledge jealously and make sure they give students only so much as to prevent them from becoming smarter or more famous. While she was an example of the former, Saruman is definitely the latter case. He embraced and cultivated all the qualities that neither teachers nor priests should possess: he is jealous, impatient, resentful, and prideful. He seeks knowledge not to become better and help others, but to gain power and importance. His focus is no longer on his main role and quest and the ones he is "sent" to inspire, teach and uplift; instead, he concentrates on himself and his selfish desires, seeing his "students" as beneath him and hindering his ambitions.

By juxtaposing Gandalf and Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien on the one hand gave an example of how detrimental, almost catastrophic, the corruption of people of Saruman's position and importance can turn out to be. On the other, however, he shows that there are good teachers, priests and role models, that it is necessary and possible to resist the temptations put in one's path and, probably most importantly, that even in spite of mistakes and blunders, one can still become successful in the proper sense of the word.

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