

The Curious Case of Denethor and the Palantír, Once More

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The suicide of Denethor is one of the most morally significant moments in *The Lord of the Rings*: It is accordingly an important point to determine what we are meant to think actually caused it. In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* I suggested that it must be Denethor's use of the *palantír*, which enabled him to see Frodo as a prisoner, "in a vision controlled by Sauron".¹ A few years later, in the course of a discussion of the different uses of the *palantíri* made by Tolkien and by Peter Jackson, I went further and wrote: "Surely we are meant to realise that what he has seen in the *palantír* is Frodo ... in the hands of Sauron".²

There were at least two things wrong with these statements (one each), and they were pointed out by Jessica Yates in her essay "The Curious Case of Denethor and the *Palantír*, in *Mallorn* 47 (Spring 2009, 18, 21-5). Jessica nevertheless accepted the central idea, that it was what he saw in the *palantír* that drove Denethor to suicide. Reviewing Jessica's piece, however, in *Tolkien Studies* 9 (2012), 136, David Bratman suggested that "the entire discussion may be too mechanistic", and furthermore dismissed the whole idea that what Denethor saw in the *palantír* was what caused his suicide as "a (probably mistaken) supposition".

Bratman gives no reason for this dismissal. Since the matter is of considerable importance for the moral interpretation of the whole work, however, I think it is worth going over the evidence, and furthermore taking Jessica's comments and corrections even a stage further.³ One benefit of this is that (as often) it indicates that Tolkien's conception of events was even subtler, deeper, and more ironic, than I think any of us had realised.

Since it is a contentious matter, however, I will begin with two points which are I believe beyond contention. One is that from the start of *The Two Towers* the characters of the Fellowship are separated into several plotlines, with characters heading off in different directions, recombining and separating again. So much is undeniable.

As undeniable, if not so obvious, is the fact that Tolkien kept close check on the timelines of the separated plots, and added a day-by-day "Chronology" in Appendix B. Tolkien moreover repeatedly showed his characters checking their own chronology and comparing it with others' experience, while he also added careful cross-references between the events which happened in different plot-lines. Limitations on space mean I can give only selected examples of this persistent habit,⁴ of which I have counted about forty cases towards the end of Book III, in *The Two Towers*, and especially in the first four chapters of Book V, in *The Return of the King*.

To begin with, the word "ago" is used about 200 times in *The Lord of the Rings*, and just over thirty times, there is a precise count, "x days / night ago." These cluster in the sections just mentioned. They start with Pippin in ch. III/9, "Flotsam and Jetsam". Telling his and Merry's tale to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli, he asks, "What day is it?"; is told "The fifth of March", counts on his fingers and says they woke up in the orc camp "Only nine days ago" (p. 549).⁵ Thereafter characters repeatedly give precise counts, right up to Denethor, who has Boromir's broken horn in his lap when Pippin and Gandalf reach him in Minas Tirith. Denethor says, "I heard it blowing ... thirteen days ago" (V/1, pp. 738-9), which is absolutely correct.

Another object which prompts cross-referencing by date is the Red Arrow carried by Hirgon, for which see Pippin's calculation (V/1, p. 731), and eventually Elfhelm's (V/5, p. 817). Moreover, sometimes we have the same event as experienced by people in different plot-lines, such as the lightning flash as the Witch-king breaks the gate of Minas Tirith (V/4, p. 810), heard and seen by Théoden and company on p. 819, V/5, though they do not know what has caused it. In the same way the great cry Gandalf and Pippin hear on p. 837, V/7, is the death of the Nazgûl on p. 824, V/6, heard there by Éowyn and Merry, and by Frodo and Sam on p. 898, VI/2. On this last occasion Tolkien adds a deliberate time-check: "It was the morning of fifteenth March ... Théoden lay dying on the Pelennor Fields."

Similarly, it is a critical moment when Ghân-buri-Ghân says "Wind is changing", V/5, p. 817, on the 14th March, and on p. 898 again Sam says – by this time it's the 15th – "the wind's changed. Something's happening. He's not having it all his own way." Another cross-plotline marker is the references to "the Dawnless Day", which is 10th March, noted as Aragorn emerges from the Paths of the Dead (V/2, p. 773), as Merry is woken up to join the Riders (V/3, p. 783), and as Pippin wakes up in Minas Tirith (V/4, p. 788). Finally, there are several explicit connecting references like the one quoted just above, between Pippin and Frodo (V/1, p. 732), between Pippin and Théoden (V/3, p. 774), and between Sam, Aragorn, Merry and Pippin (VI/1, p. 877). On that last occasion Sam wonders if he and Frodo have been forgotten. They have not. No plot line, no character or set of characters is allowed to be forgotten for very long, though this was always a danger in a multi-stranded narration.

In short, Tolkien was clearly working very hard to keep all these plot-strands in line with each other, and to keep reminding us not to fixate on just one, *because events in one affect the others*. It seems to me that since he took so much trouble to draw our attention to the comparative

chronologies, we should respond by doing what he clearly wanted us to do.

Going back, then, to the question, what makes Denethor despair? It seems unmistakable to me, *because of the time-frame so carefully given by Tolkien*, which I now rehearse.

First, Faramir is brought back to Minas Tirith, badly wounded, on 13th March, and we are told that it is rather late in the day, “It drew now to evening by the hour.” Denethor then:

rose and looked on the face of his son and was silent ... he himself went up alone into the secret room under the summit of the Tower; and many who looked up thither at that time saw a pale light that gleamed and flickered from the narrow windows for a while, and then flashed and went out. And when Denethor descended again he went to Faramir and sat beside him without speaking, but the face of the Lord was grey, more deathlike than his son's. (V/4, p. 803)

What has Denethor been doing in his secret room, high up? He has been looking in the *palantír*. There have been several hints already that that is what he does, see V/1, pp. 740-41, V/4, p. 801, and Beregon's very suggestive report at V/1, p. 748: “Some say that as he sits alone in his high chamber in the Tower at night ... he will at times search even the mind of the Enemy” (V/1, p. 748). Note also Denethor's grey face when he comes down from the Tower. When Aragorn looked in the *palantír* captured from Orthanc, that's what he looked like as well: “Grim was his face, grey-hued and weary” (V/2, p. 761).

I take it as certain then that we are meant to realise that on 13th March Denethor has been looking in the *palantír*. And what has he seen? Again I think the clues are unmistakable. When Pippin tries to cheer him up, he says:

“The fool's hope has failed. The Enemy has found it, and now his power waxes” (V/4, p. 805)

“Fool's hope” is unambiguous. In the conversation when Faramir reports meeting Frodo and Sam to Denethor and Gandalf (V/4, pp. 795-96), nobody says the word “Ring”. Denethor and Gandalf both say “this thing”, but Denethor also uses the phrase “fool's hope”, by which he means the decision to send the Ring into Mordor. When Pippin asks Gandalf just afterwards if there is any hope for Frodo, he replies, “There never was much hope ... Just a fool's hope, as I have been told” (V/4, p. 797).

Denethor further knows that “this thing” is Isildur's Bane. Considerably earlier Gandalf told Pippin that he had given away more in his interrogation by Denethor than he realised: “Denethor has given long thought to the rhyme [in Faramir's dream] and to the words *Isildur's Bane*, since Boromir went away” (V/1, p. 742). There is one scene which makes it absolutely clear that “Isildur's Bane” = the Ring. At the Council of Elrond, Frodo is asked to hold up the Ring, which he does, and Elrond says: “Behold Isildur's Bane!”

(II/2, pp. 240-41). Isildur's Bane is mentioned fifteen times in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it *always* means the Ring. And “fool's hope”, mentioned only the three times just quoted, *always* means sending Frodo and the Ring into Mordor.⁶ So when Denethor says, “The fool's hope has failed”, he must mean that sending Frodo to destroy the Ring has failed, and when he says, “The Enemy has found it, and now his power waxes”, “it” must mean the Ring. And that is what makes him despair.

So how does he know? It must be a result of looking in the *palantír*. But what has he seen there? Note, Denethor's despair comes on him *late* on 13th March. I repeat that *before* Faramir is brought back wounded, and *before* Denethor retires to his tower, we are told “It drew now to evening by the hour” (V/4, p. 801). At that point, where is Frodo?

The time-scheme with Sam and Frodo is not so clear, because Sam and Frodo are at times literally in the dark. It's said of Sam, quite explicitly:

even of the days he had quite lost count. He was in a land of darkness where the days of the world seemed forgotten, and where all who entered were forgotten too (VI/1, p. 877)

Sam is wrong, of course, for he and Frodo have not been forgotten at all, and nor have “the days of the world”, though one may have to look at Tolkien's “Chronology” to be sure of them. This however says, for the 11th of March, “Gollum visits Shelob, but seeing Frodo asleep nearly repents”, and for the 12th, “Gollum leads Frodo into Shelob's lair”. The story itself makes matters a little more precise. When Frodo and Sam fall asleep on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol it must be late on the 11th, because Sam later on is not sure whether midnight has passed, asking, “What's the time? Is it today or tomorrow?” Gollum replies, very accurately, “It's tomorrow ... or this was tomorrow when hobbits went to sleep” (IV/8, p. 700). So the hobbits fall asleep on the 11th but enter Torech Ungol, Shelob's lair, early on the 12th.

After that matters again become less clear, for when Sam thinks Frodo is dead, he loses consciousness, but he doesn't know how long for (IV/10, p. 714). Later on he collapses a second time outside the gates of Cirith Ungol, and once more:

“how long he had lain there he did not know ... He wondered what the time was. Somewhere between one day and the next, he supposed; but even of the days he had quite lost count” (VI/1, p. 877).

On the same page, however, as Sam sets off to rescue Frodo, we are given the explicit time-check quoted already: “out westward in the world it was drawing to noon upon the 14th day of March” (etc.). So Frodo is in Cirith Ungol as a captive from late on the 12th, or maybe early on the 13th, depending on how long Sam's first period of unconsciousness lasted – the Chronology says, for the 13th, “Frodo captured by the Orcs of Cirith Ungol”. He is in captivity until,

very definitely, after noon on the 14th. There can be no doubt, then, that Frodo was a captive at the time Denethor went to look in the *palantír*, which is *late* on the 13th.

I can only conclude, then, that Denethor, using the *palantír* late on the 13th saw Frodo in Cirith Ungol. Denethor then made the same mistake as Sauron before him. Sauron saw Pippin in the Orthanc Stone, assumed he was the hobbit Ring-bearer, and concluded that Saruman had the Ring. Three days later Aragorn deliberately revealed himself to Sauron in the Orthanc Stone, and Sauron concluded, again wrongly, that if Aragorn had the Stone, he must also have the hobbit and the Ring. Gandalf asks himself, on the 11th, what is the cause of Sauron's "haste and fear"? He answers himself, using the characteristic "five days ago" construction, that it must have been Aragorn using the Stone (V/4, p. 797).

Making the same mistake as Sauron, then, Denethor saw Frodo taken prisoner in the Minas Tirith Stone, knew (by putting together what he had heard from Pippin and then from Faramir) that Frodo was the Ring-bearer, and assumed Sauron had the Ring, not knowing – how could he? – that Sam had taken it.

And that is why he despaired. The critical sentences are, obviously, "The fool's hope has failed. The Enemy has found it."

Bratman finds this supposition "probably incorrect". I can only guess at why he thinks that, but two possibilities (pointed out by Jessica) are these. One is that we are told that Denethor looked again in the *palantír* before he died and saw there the Black Fleet approaching (V/7, p. 835). Moreover it's clear that Denethor thinks Faramir is beyond cure and means them to die together (V/4, p. 807, V/7, pp. 834-5). Both these could be taken to have *reinforced* Denethor's decision to commit suicide, but they do *not* account for "The fool's hope has failed. He has found it." And it is just *before* Denethor says those words that it seems to Pippin "as if something had snapped in [Denethor's] proud will". So, it's what happens late on March 13th, not early on March 15th, that makes Denethor lose his nerve.

I turn now to the things Jessica has indicated, quite rightly, as *certainly* incorrect in what I wrote years ago. Briefly, I wrote that Denethor must have seen Frodo "in the hands of Sauron", in "a vision controlled by Sauron". As Jessica has shown, both those statements must be wrong.

First, Frodo was not "in the hands of Sauron", only in the hands of the orcs. And they have not had time to communicate with Sauron, for several reasons. They may presumably have started off by obeying their orders as reported by Shagrat (IV/10, p. 723), but almost the first thing they discover is Frodo's immensely valuable *mithril* coat, and they fall to fighting over it, as reported by Snaga and Shagrat himself (VI/1, p. 885). We know also that the Nazgûl are elsewhere. Furthermore, Sauron at that point is distracted, by the appearance of Aragorn and the build-up to the Battle of the Pelennor Fields on the 15th. In the course of her valuable discussion of Tolkien's drafts, Jessica quotes Tolkien's note to himself in *The Treason of Isengard* (p. 437), "Sauron is busy

with war and it takes time for messages to reach him." As a clincher, one has to agree with Jessica (p. 22 of her article) that if Sauron knew a hobbit had been captured trying to enter Mordor he would have taken drastic action – sending a Nazgûl for him, strengthening the guard on Frodo. None of which he did.

Frodo therefore was never "in the hands of Sauron". It seems clear then that neither was Denethor's vision "controlled by Sauron", as I again wrongly proposed. But here one should consider further what we know about *palantíri*, both from *Lord of the Rings* (esp. III/11, pp. 583-4), and from the essay in *Unfinished Tales*, pp. 403-11, of which Jessica made valuable use.

First, there is some element of direction in the *palantíri*. They respond to the user's will, though that will may have to be imposed. Using it furthermore is a strain for anyone, see Aragorn's remark (V/2, p. 763). The essay in *Unfinished Tales* tells us also that, "A viewer could by his will cause the vision of the Stone to *concentrate* on some point, on or near its direct line" (p. 410). The process however, was "very tiring [and] was only undertaken when information was urgently desired" (p. 411). This, presumably, is what Denethor has done. Perturbed by what Faramir has told him, he has looked east and then *concentrated* on the Tower of Cirith Ungol. In other words, Sauron did not send Denethor the vision of Frodo to mislead him, because, as Jessica says (p. 21, my emphasis), "Sauron did not know Frodo was captured." Rather, Denethor's vision was self-directed, and he was self-deluded.

Or at least he was *on that particular occasion*, for Gandalf tells us there was some long-term element of control by Sauron over Denethor: "he saw . . . only those things which that power permitted him to see" (V/7, p. 838). Gandalf suspects that the same has been true of Saruman, whose use of the Stone led increasingly to his domination by Sauron, see IV/11, pp. 583-4. But the Frodo vision, which in my view and Jessica's is the direct cause of Denethor's suicide, was Denethor's own responsibility.

One further thing we know about *palantíri* is that there is in them an element of thought-reading. Gandalf comments again that: "Saruman certainly looked in the Stone since the orc-raid, and more of his secret thought, I do not doubt, has been read than he intended" (III/11, p. 585). A point that Jessica makes is that this means the Minas Tirith Stone was a potential security risk. If Denethor knew about the plan to send Frodo to the Cracks of Doom (which he did), and he was in the habit of wrestling mentally with Sauron (as Beregon believes he was), then every time Denethor used the Stone there was a risk of having his mind read and so betraying the most secret plan of the Western allies to the Enemy.

Jessica accordingly argues that Gandalf showed "extreme negligence in allowing Denethor to know about the quest" (p. 23. I think that this judgement is harsh. Gandalf did not *allow* Denethor to know about the quest, Denethor worked it out for himself (a) by interrogating Pippin (b) by listening

to Faramir, and (c) by considering the issue of Isildur's Bane.

What should Gandalf have done? Jessica suggests several options on p. 23. "[H]e could have forbidden Faramir to have mentioned Frodo". Again, I think not, because Gandalf did not know Faramir had met Frodo till Faramir told Gandalf and Denethor together. Alternatively, "[Gandalf] could have taken command of Minas Tirith".⁷ But would he have been obeyed? "Who is the master of Minas Tirith?" asks one of Denethor's guards. "The Lord Denethor or the Grey Wanderer?" (V/4, p. 808). He clearly means, *not* the Grey Wanderer. Finally, Jessica suggests the best response would be for Gandalf to, so to speak, impound the Stone, so Denethor can't use it. But Denethor would surely have reacted to this by treating Gandalf as an enemy, so such a plan might well backfire.

My own feeling is that what is shown by the whole business with Denethor and the Stone and his suicide, is the danger, the physical and moral danger, of basing your decisions on what you see in a Stone, or indeed a Mirror, like the Mirror of Galadriel. As I've argued elsewhere,⁸ this is "speculation", both literally – *speculum* is Latin for "mirror", and might be stretched to mean "crystal ball" – and in our ordinary sense, that is to say guessing what other people are doing, or will be doing, or might be doing, and fashioning your own actions to take advantage of this. But that is the wrong way to work, both practically – for speculation often goes wrong – and morally. The right thing to do is to decide what's right, and then trust in Providence.

Of course, basing your decisions on guesses about how people will react is what our politicians and financiers do all the time – and little good has it done them. My own feeling is that politicians would do better by trying honestly to work out what is best in the national interest, and then trust in the good sense of the voters. But Tolkien would say in addition, and with much greater philosophical range, we should trust in the ability of Providence to bring good out of evil – as long as we all do our duty. Trying to bend events to our will – that is like trying to make the Stone, or once again Galadriel's Mirror, tell you what to do. The Stones don't lie. But they help you jump to false conclusions. That is what happens to Saruman, who sees the forces massing against him and gives up. It is what happens to Sauron, who sees Pippin and jumps to the wrong conclusion, sees Aragorn and jumps to the wrong conclusion, and as a result launches his assault early and fails to close the path to the Cracks of Doom. It is what happens to Denethor too. His suicide on the brink of victory is deeply ironic.

The Lord of the Rings, I conclude, is a profoundly ironic work, so much so that I do not think we have even yet got to the bottom of its many ironies. I have also, very slowly, and over many years, crawled round to the opinion that a large part of Tolkien's whole purpose (as seen especially in his very complex multi-strand narration) was to demonstrate how Providence works, and to answer the ancient question of how divine omniscience may be reconciled with human free will.⁹ Noting the way decisions and plot-lines interact

– and especially how individual failings, like Pippin's rash use of the Orthanc *palantír*, yet turn out for the best – is a vital part of this understanding.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 P. 172 of the UK / US hardback editions (2000, 2001).
- 2 Most readily available as Appendix C to *The Road to Middle-earth*, "Peter Jackson's Film Versions", in the expanded HarperCollins edition of 2005, 409-29 (425), reprinted as "Another Road to Middle-earth: Jackson's Movie Trilogy", in *Roots and Branches* (2007), 365-86 (382).
- 3 Jessica kindly read a draft of this paper and made several valuable observations, as noted below.
- 4 By agreement with the editor of *Mallorn*, I will put a longer version up on the website www.academia.edu within a few weeks.
- 5 I give references to LotR by book and chapter, and also by page in the one-volume revised text edition by Houghton Mifflin (1994). Page numbers do at least indicate how close together / far apart quotations are.
- 6 A fourth case is possibly (but by this time not likely) ambiguous, Denethor telling Pippin, "Follow whom you will, even the Grey Fool, though his hope has failed" (V/4, p. 806).
- 7 I like this idea. Two or three British disasters in World War 2 might have been prevented if an energetic Chief of Staff had put his defeatist commanding general under close arrest and taken over. But this requires immediate support from the lower ranks (like Beregond, but he is an exception), and prompt ratification from higher ones, neither easy to arrange.
- 8 See "Peter Jackson's Film Versions", pp. 423-6.
- 9 See the dialogue between myself and Franco Manni, in *Tolkien and Philosophy*, ed. Roberto Arduini and Claudio A. Testi (2014), pp. 21-71, esp. pp. 59-65.
- 10 This point is made very strongly in an as-yet unpublished PhD thesis from Trinity College Dublin (2013), Gerard Hynes's *Creation and Sub-Creation: Divine and Human Authorship in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. On pp. 121-37 he considers "three moments of crisis in the narrative" to show "how the wills of humanity become part of the causality of providence" (125).

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