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The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death

Biblical intertextuality in the sub-text of Joanne K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels

Abstract (Deutsch) – Kirchliche Reaktionen auf den Harry-Potter-Hype umfassten anfänglich zwar auch Stimmen, die einen Einbruch neuheidnischer Magie und gnostischer Weltanschauung in die Seelen von Millionen junger Menschen befürchteten. Viele, die die Bücher selbst gelesen hatten, urteilten aber anders und erkannten, dass Harrys Geschichte nicht nur humanistische Werte transportiert, sondern durchaus auch als Allegorie auf zentrale Inhalte christlicher Religion gelesen werden kann. Der vorliegende Beitrag eines Neutestamentlers, der unerwartet und nachhaltig Leser der Romane Rowlings wurde, treibt die theologische Potter-Forschung weiter, indem er die *intertextuellen Bezugnahmen auf biblische Texte und Motive* analysiert. Nach Überlegungen zur Funktion von Intertextualität in Jugendliteratur weist er auf, dass das Arrangement des Grundkonflikts zutiefst in den Rahmen biblischer Protologie (Genesis 3) und Eschatologie (1 Kor 15) eingeschrieben ist. Da auch die Auflösung unmittelbar auf biblische Soteriologie referiert, zeigt sich: In Harrys Geschichte wird um die Plausibilität grundlegender Strukturen biblischer Religion gerungen und insofern verbindet sie sich mit der Aufgabe von Theologie.

Abstract (Français) – Au début du succès d'Harry Potter, parmi les réactions ecclésiastiques, certaines voix ont manifesté leur crainte d'une irruption de la magie néo-païenne et des conceptions gnostiques dans les âmes de millions de jeunes. Mais beaucoup de ceux qui avaient réellement lu les livres sur Harry Potter avaient un autre jugement: ils reconnaissaient que l'histoire de Harry non seulement véhicule des valeurs humanistes, mais aussi qu'elle peut être lue comme une allégorie des énoncés centraux de la religion chrétienne. L'auteur de cet article est un exégète du Nouveau Testament, qui, devenu, à sa propre surprise, un fidèle lecteur des romans de Rowlings, contribue à la recherche théologique sur Harry Potter en analysant les références intertextuelles à des textes et motifs bibliques. Après une réflexion sur la fonction de l'intertextualité dans la littérature des jeunes, il montre, que l'intrigue principale est très étroitement liée à la protologie (Genèse 3) et l'eschatologie biblique (1 Cor 15). Par ailleurs, la fin de l'histoire faisant directement référence à la sotériologie biblique, on peut percevoir que, dans l'histoire de Harry,

on défend la plausibilité des structures fondamentales de la religion biblique. À ce titre, son analyse rejoint le travail théologique.

1. Testimonial

In my life as a reader of high literature and light fiction I have occasionally been impressed by a book which is considered “low brow” or popular writing; but I had never experienced anything comparable to when I first read J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter” heptateuch: this story cast a spell over me, a complete fantasy genre *virgin*.

My wife had bought the first volume some years ago – “for later, when Paul is old enough” – and read it herself: “There is something in there, maybe especially for you theologians.” Since all the media hype instinctively repelled me, and I had enough other stuff to read anyway, I did not react at first – until one memorable night in early summer 2009, when there was a shortage of bedtime stories for my son. We agreed to give Harry Potter (which had meanwhile slipped back on to the bookshelf) a chance, to try and see if Paul could stand hearing it *already*, and if I could stand reading it *at all*.

My son nodded off toward the end of the second chapter but I could not stop reading, and lying in bed beside my sleeping son, I read on alone until after midnight and, within a few days, to the end of the book. Subsequently I bought and read the second volume and then the third with its seemingly endless finale, suspense and amazement spiralling upwards together in harmony. By the end of volume four I was neither able nor willing to resist the maelstrom. Here at the latest the hitherto four annual (and somehow self-contained) stories emerge into the tantalizing progression of an ever intensifying monumental epos. The singular plots, as well as countless details at first regarded as mere props and decorations typical of the genre, ultimately reveal themselves as far-reaching threads in a breath-taking overall composition. All in all, the series comes out to be an allegoric universal epos and claims to deal with the eternal questions of mankind: good and evil, freedom and destiny, love and violence, life and death. And all of that appears in a fantasy genre and trivial literature with affinities to sitcom and comics (WHOOSH, BANG ...), has a happy ending ... and *did not annoy me at all*. On the contrary, it affected, captivated, and of course entertained me like nothing I had read in a long time.

Fortunately, the final stage of the “Deathly Hallows” – which was somewhat strenuous not only for me but eventually also for my family – coincided with the first week of my summer holiday. The *après lecture* with its emotional sag was as short-lived as my half-hearted and abortive attempts to return to long-standing reading habits (a detective story, then a piece of *belles lettres*, detective

story, *belles lettres* ...). A second, more deliberate reading followed. During the third I began to highlight passages, take notes and record observations. Meanwhile, I have to concede six completed tours before I definitively restrained myself from turning back to the very first chapter of the very first volume: The Boy Who Lived ...

My methods of reading *Harry Potter* had become rather similar to my professional working with the *Bible*: quick readings from a fresh perspective alternating with patient analytical research. Back references and threads picked up again want to be retraced and looked up in the preceding or following volumes. The rich semantic inventory and the varied repertoires in syntax and style – reaching from the deliciously dry understatements of McGonagall and Dumbledore to Hagrid’s broad slang and Ron’s youth language – bid for a closer look. Allusions to mythic names, figures and places prove to be highly sophisticated when re-read with appropriate expertise. In crucial scenes the direct speech of various characters is meaningfully ambiguous, presenting the reader with an invitation to follow up on a potential second meaning.

So much for *my personal myth*: a biblical scholar (and literary critic at heart!) became an “untimely born” (cf. 1 Cor 15:8) but all the more devoted reader of a children’s story. And “I worked harder than all of them” (15:10) to tell the world what this story truly is.

2. Theological Harry Potter?

When the first five volumes had been published, Drexler/Wandinger (2004, 13-23) mapped various types of theological assessment in reaction to the success of the Harry Potter novels. They detected:

- o claim or denial of a potential danger to religion,
- o attestation of narrative skill for deconstructing the modern mania of technological feasibility (a theologically relevant phenomenon),
- o explanation of the story’s success referring to the resistant need for commonly shared myths as social sense-makers (a theologically relevant phenomenon),
- o attestation of power to interest readers in central (and theologically relevant) questions of *conditio humana*,
- o attestation of a potential role as *praeparatio evangelica*.

Drexler/Wandinger (2004, 25-28) have themselves located a range of “traces of *implicit theology*” in Rowling’s novels: the story’s sub-text is built on values and patterns of experience and behaviour which can, theologically, be explicitly identified as formative elements of the Christian religion. Baumgart (2006, 96-97),

on the other hand, considers the impact of Christianity on Harry Potter to be far less: “The ‘Harry Potter’-volumes contain no theology and do not follow theological roads ... A theologian may not hastily and unfairly (s)muggle in mythology or religion, let alone the Bible But for a theologian, the volumes are not without analogies to it. Fundamental questions, the driving forces of religion, arise in them”.

“The power of Love overcomes the force of death”: this was the motto for Nuechterlein (no year) to analyse the ideological sub-text of the Harry Potter narration. While waiting for the last volume he correctly anticipated the design of the complete plot and formulated it with the help of the *mimetic theory* of René Girard / Raymund Schwager. After the completion of the series Wandinger convincingly showed the very same lineup as being the decisive clue (Cf. Wandinger/Drexler 2008; Wandinger 2009; Wandinger 2010): the reign of violence isn't to be broken by some “more of the same” violence, thus mimicking and accepting its evil logic. It can be overridden only by a really contrasting act. Harry, when accepting that “I must die. It must end” (VII₃₄ 556),¹ delivers himself defencelessly into the murderous hands of Voldemort, refusing that (any more) others die on behalf of him. But doing so he veers off from being Voldemort's victim and sovereignly gives himself as a sacrifice, thus resolving an otherwise intractable situation: the Voldemort-in-him falls off definitively. The spiral of violence falters. Reconciliation gets a chance. (Cf. VII₃₆ 581.589.597 acting out a subtle reconciliation with the Malfoy family.) Harry is *figura Christi*. And sure enough: he will not kill Voldemort. Voldemort, non-repentent and incapable of understanding anything other than violence, destroys himself as his own killing curse rebounds upon himself when it collides with Harry's disarming spell.

In agreement with these findings, here is what I intend to do in this essay: after a general reflection on the *intertextuality* of this novel series (3), I shall work out two *special intertextual constellations* (4 and 5) which have, as far as I know, not yet been addressed and which relate to prominent biblical texts and motifs. Finally, I shall try and ascertain the *relationship* of Rowling's novels to Christian *religion* and to Christian *theology* more precisely than has been done hitherto (6).

¹ I refer to the *volume numbers* as shown in the table of references. As the paginations in hardcover and paperback editions as well as in UK and US editions differ, I give *chapter numbers* in subscript, followed by the *page number*.

3. Biblical Intertextuality in Harry Potter?

An all-embracing analysis of *intertextuality* in the Potter saga is yet to be accomplished. It would require an interdisciplinary effort in order to cover the various fields of reference: ancient Classical and Nordic mythologies, standards of the fantasy genre, the current treatment of socio-political phenomena in (British) mass media, and certainly the Bible and Christian theological traditions.

Karg/Mende (2010, 170-176) have recently adapted widespread intertextual models to account for the specific challenges of the Potter novels: according to them it is not only about *identifying specific references and allusions* to texts (or text systems: patterns of language and thought), or whether these are intentional on the part of the author. More specifically, the question is what role intertextual references play in constructing the meaning of a text in the *reader's mind*. In the case of the Potter series, intertextuality is subject to special conditions: quotations and allusions that necessarily must be detected by all readers who want to follow the story would be counter-productive. Stories that require a high (say bourgeois or snobbish) level of education will not find masses of young readers. Notwithstanding this, the Potter novels are "highly intertextual works" a "collecting basin of literary history ... from ancient times to the present day ... Roland Barthes' term, 'chamber of echoes', describes Rowling's books very well" (Karg/Mende 2010, 172). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that many of the young readers would be able to identify the bulk of references to text systems which are stored in cultural memories that are not theirs. So, a sufficient understanding of events and the gratifying experience of keeping track of the complex proceedings of a thrilling story *must* be possible without even noticing these references. Intertextuality, therefore, presents the offer and proposal of a *second level of meaning*; an offer that those who know and recognise the texts referred to will accept *with relish* as a surplus of meaning in addition to understanding and enjoying the mere *story*. And since the Potter novels present an exceedingly rich mix of genres (fantasy, magic, adventure, detective and school story, coming-of-age novel), almost every single reader will realise references specifically accessible to him- or herself: the Goth girl as well as the classical philologist, the fantasy fan as well as the biblical scholar.

Now, it has to be stated that many of the various references to external texts and text-systems simply help adorn the Potter text: they equip the narrated world with a rich set of figures, characterizations and literary backdrops, all of which contribute to advancing a spectacular progress of events. But beneath this textual *surface* – on the level of an *ideological sub-text*, where (while reading the text) the reader's values and convictions are negotiated – there is another layer of intertextuality in the Potter novels. This sub-textual intertextuality is more than a mere means of embellishment. Rather, the basic ideological constellation

of the story both in *conflict and solution* is built on intertextual references. And it is exactly here where *biblical* intertextuality plays if not a monopolistic, then surely a privileged role: Harry's story retells biblical narratives and utilises biblical motifs. Yes, readers unaware of this can still interact with Harry's story and find it an entertaining or enriching reading experience; but those who do recognise and enter the intertextual "echo game" get an extra *benefit*: profound insights and further excitement! Even more, the perception of the biblical intertextuality helps provide an apposite theological assessment of the relationship *between Harry and Christian religion*.

Harry is the hero of the story, but the underlying conflict starts with Tom Riddle. This is why I will concentrate on his "Voldemort project". In order to work out its reference to biblical texts and motifs I will start at the end of the story: the full scope of Riddle's venture is revealed only as the story unfolds, particularly in the concluding two volumes. Like so many aspects of Rowling's work, its biblical intertextuality becomes evident in retrospect.

4. The "Voldemort project" and 1 Corinthians 15

a. *An epitaph*

In the grand sequence of events, Harry and Hermione's visit to the graveyard of *Godric's Hollow* (VII₁₆ 265-269) is an auxiliary scene, decelerating the narrative pace before the impending apex of excitement. Regarding the emotional involvement of the readers, however, it constitutes a climax. And it is just here that the first and only *quotations* of the Bible in the whole series appear: on Christmas Eve, to the sound of carols sung inside the church, the two discover the snow-clad tomb of Harry's parents, who were murdered by Voldemort, sacrificing their lives to save their one-year-old son. He is shaken to the core as he reads their names, James and Lily Potter, and their dates of birth and death. Underneath there is an epitaph: *The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*. And here the narrative actually halts and contemplates this verbatim quotation of 1 Cor 15:26.

"Harry read the words slowly, as though he would have only one chance to take in their meaning, and he read the last of them aloud. 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death' ... A horrible thought came to him, and with it a kind of panic. 'Isn't that a Death Eater² idea? Why is that there?' 'It doesn't mean defeating death in the way the Death Eaters mean it, Harry,' said

² The *Death Eaters* are the army of terror that Voldemort has assembled to enforce his totalitarian regime.

Hermione, her voice gentle. ‘It means ... you know ... living beyond death. Living after death.’ But they were not living, thought Harry: they were gone. The empty words could not disguise the fact that his parents’ mouldering remains lay beneath snow and stone, indifferent, unknowing. And tears came before he could stop them ...” (VII₁₆ 269).

For the sake of brevity, I shall refrain from quoting the following half page. Notwithstanding some single verdicts in the chatrooms, this scene is by no means to be called *soppy*, if only because Harry, before the knowing readers’ eyes, instinctively (mis)reads the quote *against its grain*.

b. St. Paul’s promise ...

Some members of the first Christian community in Corinth did not attach much importance to the eschatological drama of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which according to the apostle constitutes the core of Christian identity. For them, Christ was the divine figure of the “ideal” human being, the visible image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God. In a process of spiritual unification with him, they intended to surmount their earthly physicality and submerge into Christ, the celestial ideal of mankind. The hope for a resurrection of the dead – as human beings in a holistic sense, including bodily existence – was not only alien, but also repulsive to them: “There is no resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor 15:12). Paul replies: If the dead *will not be* resurrected, then Christ *has not been* resurrected (15:13) and hence the gospel would be a mere (self)deception (15:14ff). “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20). And if death-bound children of Adam affiliate themselves to the risen Christ they may hope for future life even if they fall prey to death (15:20-22). But resurrection, Paul adds, occurs in a certain rank order (*tagma*): First is the already risen Christ. Then, at his coming, those who belong to him (15:23). And then the “complete legion” (*telos*) of all human beings (15:24a).

Gielen (2005, 318-322) has shown convincingly that Paul is using *military* terminology. This is why *tagma* (15:23) should not be read as “order” in a general sense, but as (military) “rank order” or “lineup”. And *telos* (15:24a) should not be rendered simply as “end”, but is *terminus technicus* for a “whole legion, main body of troops”. The idea is: Christ is the *pioneer*, the first to break through death’s lines. Those belonging to him are the *raiding patrol* that keeps open the breach. At the Revelation of Christ, they will be the first to be resurrected; the first to hail the victory over death that will be complete only when the “whole legion” of *all human beings* has followed.

It is in this context that Paul formulates the words Harry finds on his parents’ tombstone. He takes it from a bold intertextual reading of two psalms. Ps 110

is an oracle for the king whom God appoints to share His own throne and promises to “*make his enemies his footstool*” (110:1). Ps 8 praises God’s benevolence to man(kind), for he “has made him but little less than God” (8:5) and “has *put all things under his feet*” (8:6). Now, in Ancient Judaism both psalms were read as regarding the Messiah, and Paul by using their common metaphor states that God would complete his work of salvation by resurrecting the whole of humankind when Christ has annulled (*katargēsē* 1 Cor 15:24c) any rule, authority and power opposed to God and hostile to humans.³

Christ’s dominion (15:25a) will be complete only when “all enemies are put under his feet” (15:25b) and Paul immediately makes clear what he means by “all enemies”: the *last* (*eschatos*) enemy to be nullified is *death*, who was already the first and ever since the worst enemy of humankind.

c. ... a *Death Eater Idea*?

So much for Paul and back to Harry: craving for a word from his parents he meant to read the epitaph as their message to him. But taking in the meaning – the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death – the phrase sounds shockingly like a “Death Eater idea” to him. Hermione explains: “It means ... you know ... living beyond death. Living after death”. She speaks with “her voice gentle”, not (as in many other instances) a know-it-all. However, to Harry, shaken as he is, the hope she speaks of remains “empty words”.

It is exactly his misreading of the phrase that reveals what Tom Riddle goes for and what I call the “Voldemort project”. He aspires to absolute rule of the entire world. On his way to this goal other humans can be nothing to him but subject slaves or rivals to be eliminated. His instruments are intimidation, fraud and brute force. He tortures. He murders. But it is not enough for him to subject and dominate the human world: he wants to be immortal, for “there is nothing worse than death” (V₃₆ 718).

In his desire to become an *absolute self* – independent of anything or anybody and uncommitted to anything or anybody – death is the final and decisive hurdle, for death brings about the blunt contradiction of what an absolute self would be. So he tries to make himself *immune to death* by killing any potential opponent. (As a matter of fact he had tried to kill Harry, because he believed that the ominous prophecy – “the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord”, V₃₇ 741 – referred to him.) But he goes even further, further than any

³ The Verb *katargeō* is often rendered as “to destroy”. This is not false, but the semantic range is dominated by the idea of ineffectiveness and nullity rather than violence and physical annihilation. So it can be more aptly translated as “invalidate”, “annul” or “nullify”. The tone has shifted from military combat to that of exercise of political authority.

human has ever gone before (IV₃₃ 708): he actually ventures to make himself *immortal* by creating “horcruxes”. A horcrux is an object in which a wizard has hidden a fragment of his soul. He cannot die as long as the horcrux exists, because part of his soul will still be alive. Splitting one’s own soul, though, requires the act of intentionally murdering another person and Riddle creates seven horcruxes, thus mutilating his own soul beyond repair (VI₂₃ 585-589): in an insane project of murdering others, he wants to overpower his own death. After having wiped out all human rivals, death itself should be the *last enemy* he eliminates.

So, what Voldemort is ultimately up to, the story reveals by a *perverted reading* of 1 Cor 15:26. One cannot help asking: what about the original meaning? Will it – in some sense – be good for Harry and “those who belong to him”?

d. Names

Once we have recognised the perverted reading of 1 Cor 15:26 as a means to unmask the “Voldemort project”, further intertextual features detect themselves, e.g. the names *Death Eaters* and *Voldemort*.

Since the *Death Eaters*’ first appearance, readers may have been wondering about the reference of this strange appellation (IV₉ 159). Now we may associate by hindsight: the Death Eaters’ name is a monstrous *perversion of 1 Cor 15:54*, where Paul at the final climax of his chapter on resurrection exclaims: “Death is swallowed up in victory!”⁴ – Death that hitherto devours all human beings like a savage beast will, according to St. Paul, be itself *swallowed up* in the victory of life when Christ is revealed and the dead are resurrected. But Voldemort names his followers, who spread terror and death, *Death Eaters* because he himself means to *swallow up* his last opponent in triumph: he will devour the life-eating death.

With this intertextual disclosure in mind, it is auspicious to explore the meanings of “*Vol-de-mort*”, the programmatic name Tom Riddle has coined for himself imitating Old Norman or French style. “...-de-mort” obviously means “... of death”. In discussing the first syllable we should bear in mind that symbolic names are often capable of multiple allusions. In this case we can also expect an ironic tone as the programmatic intent of the intimidating name and the final outcome of the project ultimately will turn out to be diametrically opposed.

⁴ In the original 1 Cor 15:54 (cf. already Isa 25:8) we find the verb *katapinō*. This is a composite (*pinō* drink plus *kata* down) and basically refers to acts of hard drinking (something like to “knock back”) but is used also for all acts of wildly, aggressively swallowing any kind of material, especially denoting the *devouring of prey by predators*. This is the very idea behind St. Paul’s text!

- o Voldemort can be derived from the French verb *voler* (1) to fly: “flight of death”, “flies like death”, “brings death in flight” (or “flies away from death”).
- o It might be derived also from French *voler* (2) to steal, to prey, also: to fool: “the one stealing (himself) from death”, “the one fooling death”, “the one preying upon death”, but also “the one trying to steal himself from but all the more falling prey to death”.
- o Another etymology presumes an allusion to the English noun *vole* (1), meaning the zoological species of *burrowing animals*, including the *lemmings*: “vole of death, lemming of death”: Burrowing his way through to death, he is driving masses of people into death’s jaws, whereto he himself finally shall fall.
- o The nowadays hardly used English noun *vole* (2) supplies another interesting variation. It is a loanword derived from French *voler* (2) and means the winning of all the tricks in one hand of a card game. “To go the vole” means to assume full risk because one believes he can win *everything*. In his hubris, Voldemort goes the “vole on death”: he plans to take away all of death’s trumps and finally have death itself in his pocket.

e. *Crux horribilis*

A most abysmal reference to 1 Cor 15 is constituted by the murderous *horcruxes* Voldemort creates in his pursuit of immortality. For St. Paul (cf. 15:3 and often) the *cross of Jesus* means a paradox: one dies in order to make many live. Christ, likewise victim to violence as freely opting for non-violence himself, gave his life for many. And Voldemort’s horcruxes, *crosses of horror*, are the perversion of this *mysterium*: one takes many lives to win eternal life for oneself! Harry spends most of vol. 7 trying to destroy these evil artefacts by magic, but in the end will have to rebut Voldemort’s logic of horror in his own life and limb, and by doing so will demonstrate the truth of St. Paul’s logic of the cross (VII₃₆ 591 etc.).

5. The “Voldemort project” and Genesis 3

Seeing that the objective (or *causa finalis*) of the “Voldemort project” is built on alienated echoes of 1 Cor 15, one cannot help asking whether its origin (or *causa efficiens*) also has biblical references. As a matter of fact, Tom Riddle’s aspiration is ... *sin*, *sin par excellence*; “original sin”. So it is not by chance that his characterisation includes numerous references to textual motifs and subtextual structures in the biblical tale of the primordial *Fall of Man*. The intertextuality of

Voldemort's project is twofold: the eschatological stratum of 1 Cor 15 finds a counter-balance in a protological stratum echoing *Genesis 3*.⁵

a. The serpent

In the Bible it is the snake that brings about the temptation of humankind and, sure enough, in Voldemort's characterisation the serpent motif is dominant: he is a descendant and *heir* of Salazar Slytherin, founder of the homonymous Hogwarts house. Slytherin's heraldic symbol is a serpent and his name is obviously allusive: "Slithering" is the way serpents move. The snake of Gen 3:1 is said to be more "sly" than all other beasts. Like his ancestor, Voldemort speaks Parseltongue, the language of snakes. A snake, Nagini, is Voldemort's pet, the only being to which he seems emotionally attached. Finally, Voldemort's mutilation of soul affects his body: the once handsome boy looks more and more beastly and snakelike.

b. Promise of immortality

The primordial snake promises immortality to Adam and Eve – "*You surely will not die*," Gen 3:4 – thus alluring them to revolt against creatural contingency, relatedness and sociality: they try and act as if they could become absolute beings. But this turns out to be an insane arrogance and inevitably brings about death.

In order to understand the perspicuous logic behind Gen 3 we are to differentiate *mortality* (i.e. the certainty of dying at some future time) from what I call "*mortability*" (i.e. the eventuality of not being). Only the latter is *per se* immanent to creatural existence because created beings do not exist on behalf of their own necessity but on behalf of a reason external to themselves. "Mortability", therefore, doesn't mean the necessity of dying, albeit the possibility! So humankind, before its fall nether sin, was "mortable" but not at all mortal. (God didn't create humans with the intent to reduce them again to non-existence – if this were the case why should he have created them in the first place? – but wanted them to be enduring vessels of his benevolence, cf. Wis 2:23f) *Mortality*, according to the mythic tale of Gen 3, is immanent to the vain act of rejecting one's being as a relative and related existence. The absurd attempt of becoming an absolute being denudes humans of their *raison d'être* and places an unflinching

⁵ I will put forward the crucial features of Gen 3 according to the way they are alluded to in the Potter novels. Even if recent exegesis might stress some different aspects of the biblical tale, it is the following classical (say "hamartiological") reading that the "Voldemort project" evokes.

sting of death into their life. Or, as St. Paul puts it in Rom 6:23: the wages of sin is death.

Tom Riddle's pursuit of immortality restages the primordial sin of Gen 3. Voldemort has renounced his own humanity by deluding himself that he might become an absolute being. But this project is impossible and will surely kill him in the end.

c. Knowledge of good and evil

Adam and Eve perform their sin eating the fruit of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 3:5-6). Thus they claim absolute autonomy of prospect and conduct for themselves. Voldemort does likewise. He takes it upon himself to determine what is good or evil in terms of usefulness for his ascent to power. This is evident from the first volume, when Quirrell (echoing Nietzsche!) as a spokesman possessed by Voldemort utters what he has learnt from his master: "There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (I₁₇ 313).

d. Being like God

The snake promises that "absolute" Adam and Eve would *be like gods* (3:5 cf. 3:22) and Voldemort attempts to make himself a god. It comes with the Potter story having no "real" god as a narrative figure that the featuring of a *would-be-god* can be done only in an implicit way, but it is nonetheless evident: Voldemort makes the *name* he has taken for himself a *taboo*. His followers shyly address him as "Dark Lord" and a timorous or indifferent public and even opponents use expressions like *He-who-must-not-be-named* or *You-know-who*. These can't be but echoes of traditional taboos in religious language: the *name of God* (according to Jewish tradition) is not to be pronounced and the *name of Satan* is unspeakable.

The oscillation between divine and satanic taboo is also significant: the idea of Satan as a dark or mocking duplicate of God is a widespread motif and it is realised in characterising the would-be-god Voldemort by elements that will remind readers of the Satan figure: high and cold voice, cruel laughter, evil sarcasm, lust to inflict pain and despair.

e. The punishment of solitude

In the biblical narrative the would-be-gods Adam and Eve suffer an immediate *loss of social and relational competence*, which comes as a punishment commensurate to their aspiration of becoming absolute beings: ashamed of their nakedness

(Gen 3:7) they hide themselves from the one they can no longer approach with confidence, but whom they anticipate as an enemy to be feared (3:8-10). They develop a habit of lying and blaming others for their own deeds (3:11-13). – all of this becomes true also for Voldemort, whose total lack of empathic and communicative faculties becomes clear as early as the occasion of Dumbledore’s first encounter with the then eleven-year-old boy (VI₁₃ 315-329): anticipating enmity, he feels threatened by anybody approaching him and refuses well-meant support. “He wished to be different, separate, notorious ... highly self-sufficient, secretive ... has never had a friend, nor ... has ever wanted one” (328s). He doesn’t trust anybody and enjoys seeing others punished for deeds he himself committed (II₁₇ 334s; VI₁₇ 429.435; VI₂₀ 519).

f. The whence of evil

Why is Tom Riddle so abysmally evil and what is evil’s ultimate origin? The whole Potter saga invokes these questions, but it does not impose answers, neither by virtue of the narrator’s nor any character’s voice. It prefers to suggestively leave these questions *open* for the readers’ own thoughts, merely providing them a little sign-posting along the way. This is done by narrating some crucial scenes from Riddle’s prehistory and boyhood which Harry is monitoring in the “pensieve”. (This is a magic device making it possible to revisit one’s own or another’s memories and thoughts.) These scenes strongly invite the reader to cogitate on the questions formulated above. And for those readers who are building up some “theory of evil” the narrative itself activates a *scenario of options* retracing lines of thinking embossed not least by Gen 3.

(i) The narrative activates, but disallows the idea of a (gnostic) *dualistic cosmology*: It does *not* present Voldemort as being part, a proponent or embodiment of a *mythical* “dark side” conceived as a given primordial fact. Rather, the “dark side” emerges from the bad deeds of humans, and *Voldemort’s* bad deeds render it strong. The existence of a “dark side” is not the implication of any cosmic duality of good and evil, but is the consequence of human actions, defaults and choices. Voldemort is a *human being*, not the personification of some primordial evil!

(ii) Likewise, the narrative activates, but disallows the idea of an *individual predestination* to good or evil. It runs this option through, interestingly enough on Harry’s side, who shows “strange likenesses” (II₁₇ 340; II₁₈ 356) to Voldemort: when (in vol. 2) people discover that Harry, like Slytherin and Voldemort, speaks Parsel they wonder if *he* could be the “heir of Slytherin” and Harry himself is deeply unsettled. He – who could have been sorted for the house of Slytherin in the first place – fears that there might be a *destiny for evil in him*

inevitably prevailing (I₇ 133; II₉ 167f; II₁₈ 356-358). Dumbledore's remarkable answer in the great final dialogue comforts him, but it is also good for the other side. "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (II₁₈ 358). Tom Riddle is not evil a priori. He *became* evil.

(iii) With these positions disallowed, the questions remain all the more pressing and the narrative suggests an assured point of departure for the readers' afterthoughts. It is the elaborate *parallelism of Tom's and Harry's boyhoods*: two orphans growing up devoid of affection, attention or support. Tom becomes inclined to hurt and subdue others. Harry develops in a completely different way. The very moment he meets people who care about him, he begins to trust and makes friends, he becomes capable of empathy, commitment and devotion. *Why?* An initial answer imposes itself: Harry has experienced *love* in the very first year of his life. In the face of his parents' horrendous killing he witnessed their self-giving love. Even if he was too young then to understand – love remains within him; it protects him and will qualify him for love.

The great "power of love" passages are evidently echoing motifs from both biblical "songs of songs of love": *Canticles* (cf. 8:6 "love is strong as death") and *1 Corinthians 13*. Dumbledore professes that love is "more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature" (V₃₇ 743). Voldemort is ignorant of it, but Harry has experienced and absorbed it. Harry's ability to love is "uncommon skill and power", and it renders him "pure of heart". It gives him the "incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole" (VI₂₃ 601-604; cf. VI₂₀ 526). – In the final encounter with Harry, Voldemort will taunt one last time: "Is it love again? ... Dumbledore's favourite solution, *love*, which he claimed conquered death ...?" (VII₃₆ 592). – This passage liaises with vol. 1, where, after their first encounter, Harry asked why Voldemort couldn't have touched him. Dumbledore replied: "Your mother died to save you... love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply ... will give us some protection forever" (I₁₇ 321).

Now, one might ask: isn't it also true of Tom that he is the *son of a loving woman*? Merope (!) Gaunt, the neglected and ugly daughter of the "pure-blood" but completely run-down Slytherin dynasty, falls in love with the genteel, rich and handsome muggle Tom Riddle (senior). She wins him by magic, infusing him a love potion and elopes with him. It is only when she finally realises that her husband would never *freely* love her that she expands into real love. *She releases him* – and stays behind: pregnant and lost, deprived of any more strength to live. She sells off the only object of value she had taken from her family for a trifling sum – just enough to pay for the orphanage: a place for her to give birth and die, and a place for her son to live (VI₁₀ 253-256; VI₁₃ 309-311.315s).

Merope was no Lily! But still – should the tragedy *of her love* not have left some benign traces in Tom’s life? Was there no alternative of becoming absolutely *impermeable* to any goodness, friendship and humanity? Reading the passages of Voldemort’s prehistory leaves readers with afterthoughts like these. But it is again Dumbledore’s wisdom that prevents the reader from seeing biographies as predetermined by the effects of *early conditioning*: one cannot prognosticate nor retrace the ways of human lives in virtue of their childhood experiences. All of that would be “guesswork” (VI₁₀ 255). In the end Tom *Riddle*, the boy who became evil, is a *riddle*, because disposition and conditioning are not to be exchanged for freedom and responsibility. He is as much a mystery as any other human being. There *is* a *mysterium iniquitatis* and a *mysterium amoris*!

g. “Enmity has been put ...”

Tom and Harry are in many ways opposed “brothers”. Their vitae could have been respectively different, even reverse, but as a matter of fact both went their ways as they did. Once more one thinks of the Genesis tale, according to which *enmity* has been put between the serpent and the woman, between the serpent’s offspring and the woman’s offspring (3:15). The Tom-Riddle-and-Harry-Potter-saga tells the story of enmity which has been put between the one who turned out to be the “heir” of the Slytherin snake and the one who turned out to be a congenial “descendant” of a loving woman.

6. Ascertainments in retrospect

a. *An adequate reading?*

I do hope I have provided sufficing evidence that the *arrangement* of the basic conflict in the Potter novels can be fully apprehended only when realising its biblical intertextuality. Previous research has already shown that this conflict’s *resolution* – Harry’s act of self-giving and what it yields – is pursuing biblical soteriology. Notwithstanding this, I anticipate the critical question: is a reading of the Potter novels in this line an *adequate* reading or, rather, does it represent a pitiable attempt at usurping alien success?

Many will say: only the *author* herself could *authentically* name the meaning and message she has committed to her text, be it secular humanist, anti-Christian, post-Christian, esoteric, heathen, Christian ... or however else it may be classified. I dissent: literary criticism that is confident of its conceptual formulations will not look for this kind of arbiter and doesn’t even need an interview with Joanne Rowling (done by, if anybody, Rita Skeeter). This is because a

narrative text is *precisely not* the transport container for some extra-textual meaning, which would be the *real* message Ms. Rowling wanted to get across. Rather, a narrative text is the playing field of a dialogue taking place within the text itself.

There is something attendant *within* the text that we might call its *authorial entity* (or implied author). This is the total of all intentions turned into text, of all decisions of plot, of all literary devices used and all moral convictions proffered. There is also a *reading entity* (or implied reader), which is the readers as anticipated in the text, the total of expected, suggested or discouraged reading-reactions: identifications (or not) with the characters, consent (or not) with their deeds and values, and thoughts provoked *après lecture* on the morals of the story. Now, literary analysis conceives of a narrative text as the *score* of a pre-arranged dialogue in the medium of a narration presented by the authorial and followed by the reading entity. The actual readers, then, escort the implied one: their readings scatter in a spread around the reading of their intra-textual archetype.

I am well aware that in an interview Ms. Rowling admitted she has drafted the plot “struggling with religious belief” and that “my struggle really is to keep believing” (Rowling 2007). This may somehow corroborate my analysis but, still, is ultimately immaterial to our question. It is always the Potter *text* that decides on the adequacy of its readings, not *Ms. Rowling!*

What follows? One obviously *can* read and enjoy Harry’s story without realising the stratum of its biblical intertextuality. One *can* of course interpret the oscillating “echo games” in the Potter novels as alluding to various topics in humanism, psychology, or philosophy. But by no means is one to disallow Christian readers from identifying the echoes that render Harry’s story so very familiar to them: infallibly it reminds them of a set of other stories that have shaped their beliefs and hopes. When identifying these echoes they do not simply *interpret* the text in one of many more or less probable ways. They read as they quite naturally read and they do as they are meant to do. In Christian readers Harry’s story *activates* and *invokes* the impressions of another longstanding reading: that of the Bible – speaking of freedom and sin, of death and redemption, of violence and sacrifice, of putting ourselves into the place of God and of Jesus giving himself for our sake.

b. Harry and Christian theology

The negotiations taking place in the ideological sub-text of the Potter series come close to what can be established as the overall project and task of *Christian theology*, especially of what in Catholic theology normally is entrusted to the discipline of *fundamental theology*.

(Fundamental) theology intends to evince the Christian creed as reasonably communicable and believable with respect to the universal forum of human reason and wisdom. – Let it be understood: it is not that theology could convincingly *demonstrate* that in the life, death, and (if possible!) resurrection of *Jesus* an almighty and loving *God* would actually be operating human salvation; that on behalf of *Jesus*' disarming pureness of heart our enmeshment into violence and evil could break off; that *his* holy bravery could seriously empower justice and fairness with us; that not even by our death could his vivifying friendship be worn down. All of that cannot possibly be *proved* in an unequivocal way – it is a matter of hope, belief, and venture! But theology claims to try and make evident a profound plausibility in the *pattern* formed by the core convictions of Christian experience. It argues that the *fields of discourse* and the *ways of performance* of Christian identity are readily accessible to intelligence and understanding. Theology tries to establish reasoned credentials for this special way of living and thinking. Thus, theology is both afterthought and “pre-thought” of faith: *explicatio evangelii* and *praeparatio evangelica*.

Now, reading the Potter novels quite naturally results in ... finding oneself involved in theology! Not only will many readers instinctively realise that Harry is a sort of Jesus figure, but, following Harry's intriguing story, accompanying him as he works through from misunderstanding to understanding, from scandal to trust, in the end they might find themselves qualified in ideas that render *understandable* some central themes of the Christian religion. To be sure: the Potter tale is narration, not argument. But narration is a powerful media of understanding, which happens as readers consent to the proceedings and outcome of the story. And as Harry's story clearly allegorises Christian religion it is on behalf of its *narrative reasonability* and *reasonableness* that it can be paralleled to theology. Actually, it works out the “*narratability*” of some core elements of the Christian faith, and one should concede that within a comprehensive rationality check the parameter “*narratability proved*” is a requested one.

It is a whole set of features that is worked through in Harry's story thus mapping much of the architecture of the Christian creed.

- o Anthropology: *evil* is not a primordial fact but the price of human *freedom*. Wherever the possibility of evil becomes actualized, human freedom is provoked all the more; presented with the challenge of taking sides.
- o Hamartiology: *sin* is the act of rejecting one's creatural condition usurping absoluteness. Sin happens as the confidence of gratuitously being called to and sustained in existence is outrivaled by the logic of distrust. Sin sets off a spiral of fear and violence.
- o Grace: human beings need *benevolence* preceding them, *benignity* escorting them, and in the end they always need *help*. But all of that abundantly is

in their own hands (“Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it”: II₁₄ 284; II₁₇ 343; VII₂₄ 390).

- o Vicarious Christology: the deeds and fates of *one* extraordinary and representative person (“the chosen one” VI₃ 51s; “leader and symbol, saviour and guide” VII₃₇ 596) deeply impact on the deeds and fates of a *multitude* of persons.
- o Sacrificial soteriology: evil and violence can only be outraged by someone delivering him- or herself freely into the hands of the evil violent one. Only the bold *sacrifice* of a loving person changes the world.
- o Charity: human beings are capable of solidarity, empathy and compassion. They help each other even at a cost to themselves.
- o Ecclesiology: faith, hope and love cannot be performed by single individuals but are ventured, shared, and testified to in a community.

What about eschatology, then? Is the Potter saga – beyond invoking a perverted eschatology – also processing the promises of 1 Cor 15 in their *original* meaning?

c. *Harry and Eschatology*

Within the agenda of literary analysis the question has to be posed in this way: is the authorial entity intriguing its reading counterpart in a way that will stimulate in many of its actual readers the hope of a “real” resurrection of those Harry has lost: his parents; Sirius and Dumbledore; Dobby and Fred, Lupin and Tonks; let us not forget Snape, and last of all, Colin (“tiny in death” VII₃₄ 556)?

(i) One thing has to be made very clear at the outset: Harry – who in several ways is a *figura Christi* – definitely doesn’t double Jesus’ eschatological course: he is neither dying nor resurrected.

The first few sentences of the chapter “King’s Cross” (VII₃₅ 565) may give the unpleasant feeling of a resurrection scene following which could be nothing but abysmally trashy! But reading on, what becomes apparent step by step is ... that it was once more the narrative device *misleading the readers* ending in their subsequent pleasure: Harry’s dream – during a state of faint, a kind of near-death experience – is sorting out the last entangled threads of the story. One last time Dumbledore – not his ghost, to be sure, but *Dumbledore remembered* and *understood* at last! – is pulling out all the stops. This is a foretaste of resurrection that may happen already now: understanding!

(ii) Secondly we have to note that Harry never avows the hope for resurrection. Rather, the position he learns from Dumbledore is to *accept creatural mortality* – his own and that of the deceased.

This begins already in the first volume, after the destruction of the life-lengthening philosophers' stone, when a serene Dumbledore said to Harry: "After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure" (I₁₇ 320). In his "Mount of Olives" scene Harry nearly breaks down in agony (VII₃₄ 554-560), but lastly he conforms to having to die and sets forth on the way to his sacrifice. As he survives and Voldemort ultimately fails, Harry unexpectedly finds himself in possession of all three "Deathly Hallows": Elder Wand, Resurrection Stone, and Invisibility Cloak. According to the legend, this would make him "master of Death", death's conqueror and vanquisher (VII₂₁ 333). But as "no magic can raise the dead, and that's that," (VII₂₂ 346) Harry renounces these futile remedies against death, thus becoming all the more "the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying" (VII₃₅ 577). Harry keeps only his treasured Invisibility Cloak that has hidden him and his friends in so many menaces. But when time has come, like the cloak's legendary creator, he will pass it on to his son (VII₃₆ 599) and welcome death "as an old friend". Together with him, as "equals," "gladly" he will "depart this life" (VII₂₁ 332). – The allusion to 1 Cor 15:26 is evident, but again it is against the grain! Death: not the last enemy, but an old friend; not nullified, but welcomed; not subjected, but equal!

(iii) For the readers this position – let's call it *sagacity* and let's remember that it comes close to some prominent texts in the sapiential books of the Bible – exhibits a powerful proposal. But there is also a fine sideline in it. I call it the "*Patronus*" line that invokes the Christian belief of *communio sanctorum*: even though the deceased never return to our world or our lives, our love for the loved ones doesn't have to fade away. In loving remembrance the living and the dead remain close to each other.

Harry could never have mustered the courage for his sacrifice, had he not been – as Bonhoeffer put it – "by gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered". As Dumbledore's legacy he had received the Stone of Resurrection. This magic artefact had induced many wizards to insane experiments; even Dumbledore used it in a misguided way. Not so with Harry. He employs the stone to awaken the *loving memory* of his parents, and of Sirius and Lupin. They come and encourage him. Not as human beings of flesh and blood, much less as ghosts, but as "memory made nearly solid". These strong memories accompany him, they are an undetachable part of himself staying with him till the very end: "Harry looked at his mother. 'Stay close to me,' he said quietly. And he set off" (VII₃₄ 560s).

(iv) Let it be clear: the hope for a Resurrection of the Dead is not the proposal the narrating voice would frankly conjure up for its readers. On one occasion Hermione has discreetly hinted at it, but beyond this it does not appear. So resurrection somehow remains a *blank space*. A pity? I don't think so. Blank spaces are part of any narrative communication; they are entrusted to the *readers*. Many of them will be overflowing with thoughts when re-reading the epitaph of Harry's parents.

d. Harry and God

At the end of this theological appraisal of the Potter novels one might ask: There is no God in Harry's story; how come that it can be a *praeparatio evangelica*?

There are several ways stories can invite their readers to believe in God. The first: God is a (likeable) figure of the narration. But this normally turns out to be blasphemous: no "figures of God" are to be made by humans. The second: the (likeable) hero is a believer, an *exemplum fidei*. But such stories very often turn out to be awkward or trashy. The Potter novels adhere to a third way, the allegoric one: there *are* stories capable of powerfully suggesting faith in God, even though (or should I say: because) God and faith remain extra-textual to them. The parables of Jesus, just to mention, are such stories. In order to provoke effects of disclosure in the field of the hearer's most intimate convictions they tell a story entirely playing in a different field. They are "god-less" and mundane, but somehow they manage to provoke people to think of God and change their habits. Could this be true also for Harry's story? Surely he is not an *exemplum fidei* but for quite a number of readers he could very well be an *allegoria fidei*. And this is quite something these days.

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