Painting Myths With Literature: fantasy as (sub-)creation in “Leaf by Niggle” and in “On Fairy-Stories”, by J. R. R. Tolkien

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I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much.

(Carpenter, Letters 288-89)

1. Finding Hope and Enchantment Through Art

Tolkien was always a man very much in love with the natural world. For him, the stars, the trees, the heavens, they all concealed mythological truths about the beginning of the world, a mystery still hidden away from the grasp of Mankind.¹ He thought that this separation between Mankind and

¹ For Tolkien, language and myth were undeniably interwoven into each other. The primordial men who were still trying to understand and organise the original chaos that surrounded them thought of the world in animistic terms: “But the first men to talk of ‘trees’ and ‘stars’ saw things very differently. To them, the world was alive with mythological beings. They saw stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music. They saw the sky as a jewelled tent, and the earth as the womb whence all living things have come. To them, the whole of creation was ‘myth-woven and elf-patterned’” (Carpenter, The Inklings 43). Tolkien believed that the original literal form of the first words created was closer to the reality of things and of nature than their later forms rich in metaphoric, multiple meanings. In that way, language becomes a sort of time portal that gives access to the world of gods and, through it, one can recover the long lost pieces of the world’s first mythological mysteries.
myth was greatly increased with The Discoveries that took place in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century and that crushed, under the weight of Science and Reason, many of the enigmas of the old cosmogony. Suddenly, the world seemed “(...) too narrow to hold both men and elves (...)” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 111). Thus commenced what we consider to be the twilight of Mankind.

The tendency towards scientific and rational thought began its ascending journey, culminating with the highly mechanised world of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and with its two destructive wars. In a letter sent to to his son Christopher, Tolkien expresses his feelings about the pointlessness of war; illuding men by leading them to believe they have the power, war serves only the machines that lay triumphant over the bodies of both the dead and the living:

Well, the first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter — leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. As the servants of the Machines are becoming a privileged class, the machines are going to be enormously more powerful. (Carpenter, \textit{Letters} 111)

Mankind was now farther from the natural world and from God as it had ever been, bereaved in a faithless world that took Science for its new master. Tolkien said that “The rawness and ugliness of modern European life is the sign of a biological inferiority, of an insufficient or false reaction to environment” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 150).

It was essential that Humanity was brought closer to the divine, once more, and for Tolkien the answer to this imperative was to be found in art. Deriving his creations from the Primary World — the tangible world — that, according to Christian belief, was created by a Maker who also created Mankind to His likeness, the artist can only create, or rather, sub-create a Secondary World, a fictional world in accordance with the derivative patterns to which he is bound to. At the heart of this Secondary World stands Imagination, the core of the creative process.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{2} Cf. Abrams (476-78)
Tolkien saw in literature’s use of Imagination — and on the fairy-story, i.e., fantasy, its highest form of expression — an alternative to the anguish of the technocratic modern world. Fairy-stories, and most specifically those that draw on myth — and in “On Fairy-Stories” it is the Christian myth that is largely referred to — are the ones most fully capable of enchanting both characters and reader.³

Fairy-stories take place in the realm of Faërie that Tolkien describes thus:

*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 113)

Enchantment is at the centre of the sub-creation of a Secondary World for it is the state we enter when we give ourselves in to the magic of *Faërie*. In order for this to take place, there has to be “literary belief”:⁴

He [the story-maker] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 132)

As such, the success of “literary belief” depends on the craftsmanship of the sub-creator which proves effective when he sub-creates a world free from the “(...) domination of observed ‘fact’ (...)” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 139),

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³ Even though Tolkien’s sub-creative literary theory draws extensively on the motifs of Christian myth, his works were also greatly influenced by myths and legends from other sources. For example, Tolkien alludes to the anglo-saxon poem *Beowulf*, preserved in one single manuscript dated from circa 1000, to the *Völsunga saga*, an Icelandic saga dated from the 13th century; and to the Arthurian myth.

⁴ Cf. Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 132. The notion of belief is also central to the Christian myth, as it becomes clear in Jn. 20:24-29, for instance.
and uses the power of Imagination to give to its “(...) ideal creations the inner consistency of reality” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 138). So long as the sub-created Secondary World remains coherent within its own limits — and these limits may or may not coincide with those of the Primary World, and usually they do not — there is enchantment as well as Recovery, Escape and Consolation.

2. We all need Recovery, Escape, Consolation

Recovery, Escape and Consolation seem to be the answer Tolkien found to the questions “What is the use of fairy-stories?”, “What is their function?”. Tolkien argues that one of the uses of fairy-stories is to bestow upon the reader the blessing of Recovery: the “(...) regaining of a clear view” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 146) of something that, due to appropriation and habit, has become trite or ordinary. Recovery gives the reader the possibility — and the gift — of looking at his Primary World anew and suddenly contemplate with wonder and awe, as if for the first time, what has become familiar:

We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep and dogs and horses — and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 146)

Fairy-stories use Imagination to sub-create a Secondary World that derives its motifs from the Primary World, giving them the appearance of the new. It is this sublimated fictional reality that awakens the readers to the wonder of things that surround them, and by doing so, provides them with Escape.

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5 One must not forget, at this point, that when the writer becomes a sub-creator, he is reenacting the Myth of Creation. This renovatio of the mythical pattern in the secular world is a cosmogonic reiteration that opens up to a sacred time when Mankind, God and Nature were as one. (Eliade 58)

6 “They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them.” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 146)
Escape is, according to Tolkien, one of the main functions of fairy-stories and instead of being mere alienation from reality, as some have argued, it is rather a form of enhancing it, very much in the semblance of Recovery. Tolkien stresses how important it is to distinguish “Escape” from “Flight”: the latter points to isolation from life, whereas the first, while implying a certain detachment from reality, still holds with it a fundamental bond, because the ultimate, “(...) wickeder face (...)” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 149) of Escapism is Reaction. Creative fantasy that offers Escape remains tied-in with the Primary World and, from a linguistic point of view, the use of the adjective is the sign of that bridge as well as of literary creativity.

The adjective, due to its qualitative grammatical nature, is the best example to illustrate “(...) the potency of words (...)” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 147) to create worlds anew. When the sub-creator envisages a centaur, he is relying on the reader’s ability to recognise the difference in the real world between a man and a horse. Only when we have the knowledge of the world that surrounds us, can we understand other worlds and its fantastic creations: “For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 144).

These fantastic creations are the translation of the fulfilment of ancient human desires, such as the desire to visit the deep sea, to talk to other living things or even the desire to escape from death; the satisfaction of these yearnings, allied to the predominantly optimistic tone of the fairy tale, point towards what Tolkien calls Consolation.

The Consolation of the Happy Ending which Tolkien describes as the eucatastrophe, the good catastrophe, is the highest function of the fairy-story and all complete fairy-stories must have it. Tolkien coins the word eucatastrophe to illustrate the unexpected moment when Joy occurs in the tale:

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7 “There are other things more grim and terrible to fly from than the noise, stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal-combustion engine. There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death.” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 151)

8 Cf. Bettelheim. (35-41)
(...) it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary for the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 153)

Thus, Consolation is a gift that aims at the essential emotion of Christian Joy “(...) which produces tears because it is qualitatively so like sorrow, because it comes from those places where Joy and Sorrow are at one, reconciled, as selfishness and altruism are lost in Love” (Carpenter, *Letters* 100). When the sub-created universe proves to be successfully coherent within its own borders, the Joy that it presents the reader is like a glimpse of the “(...) underlying reality or truth” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 155) that illuminates both World and Humanity. This particular Joy is the proof of the presence of the *evangelium* in the Primary World.

According to Tolkien, the Christian Story is the greatest fairy-story ever to be written, seeing that the Birth of Christ is the *eucatastrophe* of Mankind’s history and the Resurrection, the *eucatastrophe* of the Story of the Incarnation. By beginning and ending with Joy, the Christian Story, at the same time, guarantees the ultimate triumph of Good and rejects the idea of cosmogonic failure. This Story seems to have been written by the perfect craftsman who lent it that “inner consistency of reality” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 138), therefore allowing its transference from the Secondary World of fiction to the Primary World of reality where this Story is thought of as being ‘primarily’ true. However, for Tolkien, the Christian Story seemed to be more than a mere sub-creation of the secondary, fictional world. On a 1945 letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien refers to an essay written by C. S. Lewis where he shows “(...) of what great value the ‘story-value’ was, as mental nourishment — of the whole Chr. story (NT especially)” (Carpenter, *Letters* 109). According to Tolkien, the beauty of the Christian Story which, in its turn, assigns it its value, is closely, if not essentially intertwined with its truth, and here we might add the adjective “primary”. *Fidelis* (Carpenter, *Letters* 109), thus arises when nourishment can be found both in the beauty of the Story, as well as its truth. As such, in Christian Story, beauty and truth, “Legend and History have met and
fused” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 156). Ergo, all fairy-stories, when the task of the sub-creator proves to be successful, may come True and that is certainly what we see happen in Tolkien’s “Leaf by Niggle”.

3. Painting Myths With Niggle

This is a poetic tale about an artist named Niggle who is about to venture on a journey. Being Mr. Parish’s only neighbour, Niggle finds himself being continually forced to procrastinate the painting of his picture to deal with Parish’s constant requests for help which he answers only because he must, because it is the law. Niggle’s picture has a very magical and poetic quality to it, despite the fact that Niggle is neither very successful, nor appreciated as a painter:

It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind, and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out the most fantastic roots. Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to. Then all round the Tree, and behind it, through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow. (Tolkien, “Niggle” 122)

This Tree started as a leaf and is ever-expanding both inwardly and outwardly. On the one hand, it may be thought of as being a representation of the creative process which is, most of the times, organic, chaotic and unpredictable, always branching out, always seeking for the still uncharted mental landscapes of the world. On the other hand, this Tree also stands for the symbol of the new art form interpretation Tolkien proposed in his lecture “On Fairy-Stories”.

When Niggle embarks on the much expected journey of his own consciousness, as we later come to perceive, he arrives at a purgatorial land

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9 The thematic harmony that links both “On Fairy-Stories” — a 1938 lecture that was first published in 1947 — and “Leaf by Niggle” — a tale written around the same time — resulted in the joint publication of the two texts in the book *Tree and Leaf* (1964), which also included “Mythopoeia”, a poem that had never been published before.
where he will experience Escape, Recovery and, finally, Consolation.\textsuperscript{10} It is in this other-land that he falls ill, seeing that the physical pain is but the external expression of a spiritual wound. In order to heal himself, Niggle first has to regain a view of how all human experiences are interrelated with one another.

While in the Infirmary, Niggle hears the Voices of his own mind discussing his life and the choices he made, concluding that perhaps he was not the best neighbour he could have been, that Mr. Parish was not such a nuisance after all and, most importantly, that he should have enjoyed himself more and finished his painting, rather than make up excuses for his inertia. In “On Fairy-Stories”, this lesson in perseverance is clear when Tolkien states that “We do not, or need not, despair of drawing because all lines must be either curved or straight, nor of painting because there are only three ‘primary’ colours” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 145).\textsuperscript{11} These Voices bring Niggle a deeper understanding of the whole of the human experience and of how inner and outer life also depends on the endeavours of others. We must always create, thus enriching our world and that of those that surround us.\textsuperscript{12} When Niggle recovers a new vision of life and finds himself healed, he proves to be ready to proceed on his journey of awareness.\textsuperscript{13}

The next stage on his ascending journey towards the Mountains brings him to the landscape he had painted in his painting. Suddenly, Niggle’s sub-created world becomes a Primary World. Undoubtedly — and due to the skill of its maker —, this world is infused with that vital sap

\textsuperscript{10} Cf. Carpenter (195)

\textsuperscript{11} It is interesting to point out the emphasis Tolkien endows the word “primary” with, thus alluding to a rich world where the three primary colours, via the creative power of Imagination, have the ability to extrapolate themselves and become all the ‘secondary’ colours one can possibly — and impossibly — fathom.

\textsuperscript{12} At this point, one must not neglect Niggle’s Parish, a place where all who want to go over the Mountains must pass. This is a country which vital force now derives from both Niggle’s creativity and Parish’s skill. By working together, the two of them have sub-created a unique land.

\textsuperscript{13} On the paramount importance of the recovery of health, cf. Tolkien, “Niggle” 134, and Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 146.
we have been calling “inner consistency of reality” (Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories” 138) which, nonetheless, accords with the laws of Imagination: “All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them” (Tolkien, “Niggle” 136). It is into this landscape that Niggle escapes, leaving behind an unfulfilling life. This seems to be a much more tellurian realm than the one in the painting: Niggle’s tree is finished and it has become alive; what once had been the surroundings, now was a detailed Forest you could walk into, “…new distances opened out” (Tolkien, “Niggle” 137). The Mountains, once the claustrophobic background and end of the painting, now seemed to be a beginning, perhaps the beginning of a new picture and a new country. These Mountains hint at what could be the presence of the evangélium in the world, of Christian Grace and Joy to be found in the Consolation.

There is no decisive moment of consolation in “Leaf by Niggle” as the one found in The Lord of the Rings, when the One Ring is destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. Tolkien thought that untold stories were often more moving perhaps because they had that sense of endlessness and that mystery that is so characteristic of the transcendent.¹⁴ In this tale, Consolation reaches us through hope in what country may lie beyond the Mountains, a place we may easily imagine to be similar to the Garden of Eden of the Christian myth, where Mankind can finally conquer eternal life and thus fulfil its desire to escape Death which is, as Tolkien calls it, the Great Escape.¹⁵

Works Cited


Resumo

A tecnologia diminuiu as distâncias geográficas. Não negamos o papel cimeiro que a tecnologia tem desempenhado nos meios político, económico e cultural. Porém, reconhecemos igualmente ter sido a tecnologia a principal responsável pelo solucionar de grande parte dos mistérios que ainda restavam à Humanidade descobrir. Assim se inicia o que chamamos de crepúsculo da Humanidade. Com poucos mistérios ainda por revelar, o ser humano viu-se obrigado a enfrentar a extinção da sua fé e da sua crença.

Para Tolkien, a resposta para esta angústia poderia ser encontrada na literatura que evoca o mito. Deste modo, a literatura recupera pedaços de um mundo de mistério mitológico do início dos tempos, agora perdido. Tanto “Leaf by Niggle”, como “On Fairy-Stories” reiteram a descrição que Tolkien faz do processo criativo literário, comparando-o a um estado de fascínio contemplativo, a um acto divino. A literatura, no seu âmago, é um acto de (sub-)criação mitológica, uma vez que sub-cria um mundo onde a Recuperação, o Escape e a Consolação se tornam efectivamente reais.

Realçaremos como o mito, a fantasia e a literatura estão interligados organicamente e que é esta trindade que tem ajudado a Humanidade a sobreviver num mundo que se tornou árido de mistérios.

Palavras-chave
Mito; (Sub-)Criação literária; Contos-de-fadas; Niggle, Tolkien.

Abstract

Technology has shortened geographical distances. We do not deny the paramount position technology has occupied in the political, economical and cultural milieus. However, we likewise recognize that it has been the main reason responsible for the deciphering of the mysteries still left for Humanity to disclose. Thus begins what we will call the twilight of Mankind. With few secrets left to unravel, human beings have had to come up against the extinction of their faith and belief.
For Tolkien, the answer to this anguish could be found in the sort of fantastic literature that draws on myth. As such, literature brings back to Mankind pieces of the now lost mythological mystery of the beginning of times. Both “Leaf by Niggle” and “On Fairy Stories” emphasize Tolkien’s description of the literary creative process, comparing it to a contemplative state of awe, to a divine act. Literature, at its core, is an act of mythological (sub)-creation for it sub-creates a world where Recovery, Escape and Consolation become, in fact, real.

We aim to prove that myth, fantasy and literature are organically linked and that this trinity has been helping Mankind to survive in a world that is becoming void of mysteries.

**Keywords**

Myth; Literary (sub-)creation; Fairy-Stories; Niggle; Tolkien.