
Between Middle Earth and Buczacz

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With the release of the first installment of Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* film trilogy, diehard Middle Earth fans are reveling in the experience of entering J.R.R. Tolkien's fully realized world. I vividly recall a delightful yet unsettling feeling, when the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy opened in 2001, that the filmmakers had somehow invaded my childhood reading consciousness. For me, the delight of reading has always been the imaginative work that I as the reader must do in surrendering a bit of mindscape to an author while simultaneously partnering with him or her in constructing the mental images, the landscape, of works of literature. Tolkien was the first great writer that did this for me when I discovered him in the fourth grade. The films so captured the imaginary world as written by Tolkien and portrayed in my mind's eye that seeing the movies generated a powerful déjà vu – but in this case I was seeing places and creatures on the movie screen I had only been to and met in my imagination.

The richness of the world Tolkien created, with its varied races and languages, geography and history, myths and cultures, naturally led readers to seek out parallels with our own world. The Shire, home to the Hobbits, resembles the rustic English countryside; some saw the Fellowship of the Ring as a metaphor for the men that went off to save the world from tyranny in World War I, like Tolkien himself who served in the trenches. Most significantly many readers saw the epic War of the Ring as an allegory for World War II – the ring being a symbol of the A-bomb, a small device with apocalyptic, destructive power.

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Tolkien vehemently rejected any allegorical interpretations of his work, especially *The Lord of the Rings*. He found allegorical reading “less interesting” from an artistic point of view. On one occasion only did Tolkien intentionally write allegory, in a small parable entitled “Leaf by Niggle”, as a metaphor for fantasy literature and for his creative process in general.

Niggle is a painter who envisions a giant tree which he attempts to execute on a giant canvas, but alas “he was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees.” He would spend countless hours “niggling” away at the details of each and every leaf on his large-scale painting. Soon the canvas became so large that he could only work on it astride a ladder, as details multiplied, and the tree sent out new branches and roots, with distant villages and mountains visible in the distance between the gaps in the leaves.

The knowledge of an upcoming trip and the necessary preparations, in addition to an unfortunate neighbor who is always pestering him for help, keep interrupting Niggle from his work. When he sets out on the journey he is waylaid in a type of institution where he is punished for his lack of preparation, until he is paroled in a countryside which is none other than the world of his painting, including an embodiment of his two-dimensional painted tree in reality – the actual realization of

his vision.

On one hand the parable represents the Christian notions of life, death, purgatory and paradise, but on another level it explains the author's own literary philosophy of "Sub-Creation," defined as "the process of inventing an imaginary or secondary world, different from the primary world but internally consistent." For Tolkien, a devout Catholic, this spark of invention is both the method and the right we have to imitate God, despite our distance from Him. Worthy acts of human creativity are expressions of the artist's own world-building as a sub-set within God's primary creation.

It's precisely in regard to what he called Mythopoeia (a term he coined, meaning "mythos-making") that Tolkien draws our attention and invites comparison to the greatest modern Hebrew author, S.Y. Agnon – the only Nobel winner for Hebrew literature.

Despite being contemporaries, we can presume that Agnon (1888-1970) had no awareness of the work of the Oxford Don Tolkien (1893-1973). Tolkien's works weren't translated into Hebrew until after Agnon's death, and he didn't read English. Presumably Tolkien took note of Agnon's receipt of the Nobel in 1966 as is the nature of anyone in the literary arena, especially those, like Tolkien, whose names would perennially appear on Nobel short-lists.

And yet, there are various ways Tolkien and Agnon resemble each other – a love of nature and the outdoors, appreciation for a good drink, a bookish reclusiveness mixed with a gregarious wit – indeed, there was something quite "Hobbitish" about both men as they moved into later life. Isn't the Shire itself something like a Middle Earth version of the *shtetl*? Both are principally closed societies whose residents exist, to varying degrees, in naïve isolation from and in suspicion of the larger, outside world.

While "Leaf by Niggle" was an atypical composition for Tolkien to reflect on the creative act, Agnon's writings provide countless examples of the type of meta-artistic reflection. During his long career he wrote in a wide variety of genres, styles and lengths. Yet throughout the entire canon of Agnon's works one theme appears again and again: artists reflecting on the act of artistic creation. Sometimes it is done by a character who is himself an author, but just as often the creator might be a woodworker, ritual scribe, medieval poet, architect, sign-painter, or even taxidermist. In each case, Agnon is reflecting on the power of the creative act to impact reality in this world. In the most famous example, Yitzhak Kummer – a simple sign-painter scribbles the words "mad dog" on the back of a Jerusalem stray in Agnon's magnum opus *Only Yesterday*, setting in motion a series of tragic circumstances leading to his own death.

Unlike Professor Tolkien, who sometimes had to take on grading extra term papers to balance his budget, for most of his long life Agnon was supported by the generosity of his patron Salman Schocken, allowing him the freedom to write unencumbered (his active career spanned over sixty years), yet often leaving him feeling shackled by the need to produce writing – much of which was featured or serialized in Schocken's *Ha'aretz* newspaper.

This arrangement may have been in Agnon's mind when he penned a passage in a late novel *To This Day*. The novel features a narrator who is clearly a semi-autobiographic projection of Agnon himself. At one point the narrator relates a parable of an architect commissioned to build a new castle for a king, but like Niggle, he dithers away the time and instead takes "a large canvas, painted a castle on it so skillfully that it looked real, and sent the emperor a message that the task was completed." When the Emperor discovers the ruse he's furious.

"Not only have you disobeyed my orders, you have deceived me into thinking that the mere appearance of a building is a building." "Mere appearance, you say?" replied the architect, knocking on a door he had painted. "We shall see about that." The door opened and the architect stepped through it and was never seen again.

Like *Niggle*, Agnon's allegory can be read on at least two planes: We can understand the desire of an author to escape into his own work as a way of evading the pressures of having to produce stories to satisfy his patron's printing press. But on a deeper level, like Niggle's tree which takes on a life of its own, until in some other reality it becomes an actual embodiment of an abstract, artistic ideal, the architect's palace which exists only in blueprint has an existence of its own in some form of reality.

In his final years, when many had thought he'd given up writing, Agnon was reconstructing the Old World now destroyed, composing the stories that would occupy his *Ir uMelo'ah*, the monumental, posthumous collection of the tales of his native Buczacz.

That work, published posthumously, his largest single volume, is a great cycle of stories and literary meta-history which – through the prism of his own Galician *shtetl* – tells the story of Eastern European Jewry, its life, legends, learning, triumphs and foibles, but does so through the mechanism of fiction. While this was one of the agendas of the entire corpus of Agnon's lifelong work, it reaches a tragic crescendo in *Ir uMelo'ah* (the title means something like "The City and its Fullness").

Written after the Holocaust, and the destruction of his town along with the rest of the Shoah's victims, the volume reconstructs the life of a city that was lost – "I am building a city!" he confided to Israeli critic Baruch Kurzweil.

Tolkien taught us that a world existing in imagination only is, in some sense, no less real than our own; Agnon's accomplishment was to make a world that once existed, and no longer does, live still, if only through imagination.