

In a Hole in the Ground There Lived a Hobbit; or, a Few Comments on Fictional Space of Narrative and Mental Imagery

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Apart from the suggestions made by the editors of the current volume, which allowed also for employing some aspects of cognitive approach for inquiring into the relation of fictional worlds and our mind, there is a particular incentive for my inquiry that does not stem from my research interest but from traditional teaching of literature. Though the situation may be changing slowly, the answer of a Czech pupil asked the question what literature is good for remains predictable: "Literature is supposed to develop our imagination — and our vocabulary." Apparently, it implies also the primary school concept of *literariness*: imaginative writing as means of education + poetic language surpassing our everyday communication practice.

Unfortunately, the pupil usually receives her straight A for the answer we have already got acquainted with, and is hardly asked the next question, which would be "Does literature stimulate our imagination by telling us so much?" — or — "does it stimulate our imagination because it does not tell us enough?" In other words, does employing our imagination in the interaction with fiction mean constituting a mental possible world and eventually, "picturing what we have been told"? Or does mental imagery function especially as a compensatory strategy? In other words, does it mean that we are supposed to "imagine" what is missing?

In order to give an elusive answer to these questions I am going to focus on *fictional* (i.e. constructed by *narrative texts*) and *mental landscapes*. The first reason is a heuristic one: while other components of the narrative *storyworld* are considered indispensable, landscape (here apprehended either as a metonymy for a *spatial domain* of a fictional world or, as a specification of *setting* in narrative structure) is a component that may be easily omitted as well as flamboyantly represented in narrative fiction. And while narrative gaps in the plot inevitably make us ponder on possible solutions, spatial gaps may leave us incurious, since they mostly do not affect the coherence and logic of the story the meaning of which we are after. The second reason: landscape is my favorite topic, both in literature, and in everyday life.

A number of readers will say that they love flamboyant landscape descriptions capable of invoking the immersive feeling of "*as if being there*". Others will insist they dislike the same descriptive mode for reason of its not leaving any space *for their own imagination*. Others claim that they are not in favour of illustrations since they may not conform to their own *images of the storyworld*. Needless to say these statements may result rather from discursive beliefs than from genuine experience (pupils and students declare this in scholarly context because they believe that they are expected to do so). But the conjuncture of these attitudes is the fact that they attach particular importance to mental imagery.

The conjuncture of my research interest and teaching practice has also resulted in an attempt at finding out in what cases and to what extent readers feel prone to mental picturing when reading narrative fiction, that is, more precisely, in trying to determine some typical textual conditions of mental imagery while not taking into account various individual dispositions of readers involved.¹

I have to stipulate that I am not going to explain how mental images come into existence in our mind since I am neither psychologist nor neuroscientist. I am going to rely on the simple fact that there is a certain kind of experience we share, which is usually — that means beyond the sphere of science, in everyday life — referred to as "seeing in the mind's eye". This metaphor mostly denotes the process of visualization of something that is not being perceived visually at the moment (such as a memory of a landscape) or something that is or was not necessarily conveyed in a visual representation (such as verbal representation of a landscape in a novel). Though visualization represents the most frequent form of mental imagery, it is not the only one possible; mental imagery includes also other forms of quasi-sensorial or quasi-perceptual experience (even undetermined forms which we tend to express by saying we imagine "the feel of something"). Obviously, mental images are "images of something" outside our mind, and as such they may be understood as a certain form of representation. Thus, what I am going to refer to, is, in other words, also a *form of mental representation* initialized, stimulated or suggested by reception of *verbal representation* — that is textual construction of fictional worlds — in literary narrative. And what I am going to ponder on are the *textual* and, inevitably the *contextual* conditions of mental imagery, in order to identify at least some of its typical triggers.

Let us sum up the above mentioned attitudes and beliefs as premises of our inquiry and confront them with some modes of theorizing the fictional world's construction and comprehension. Some of them exclude each other, some are partially compatible, some represent variously conditioned alternatives:

First premise: a highly saturated construction of fictional landscape (that is a detailed description from the textual point of view) stimulates mental imagery by providing us with an abundance of verbal information.

Second premise: a highly saturated construction of fictional of landscape prevents us from employing our imagination by providing "too much" verbal information; in other words, a detailed description "kills our imagination" due to not leaving any or enough "blank space" to fill in.

¹ Suffice it to say that mental picturing may vary significantly in individuals; there are even cases of mental imagery where it is almost impossible to assess their common denominator: a different textual cue may induce a similar result, sometimes referred to as *madeleine effect*, a mental resonance which results from a coincidence of the particular fictional constellation and reader's individual memory. Indeed, I am pleased to read in Marie-Laure Ryan's monograph *Narrative as Virtual Reality* that records on such modes of reception are "usually judged too impressionistic to be taken seriously by literary theory or literary criticism but they reveal a dimension of phenomenology of reading that cannot be ignored" (Ryan 2001, 121— 122). To conclude, I suppose that we are allowed to mention such coincidental resonances even as literary theorists — let us say in occasional confessions — but the only way to conceptualize the matter is to use the above mentioned Proustian metaphor.

Third premise: a less saturated or lacunary landscape construction leaves enough space for employing our imagination; in other words, in case there are not enough cues suggesting at least a general scheme of landscape we might feel free to construct a mental landscape of our own.

Obviously, the latter premise does not comply with the semiotic concept of text-constructed fictional worlds of literature: such fictional worlds are essentially incomplete, thus the world-constructing text provides the reader with a semiotic project where lacunas - according to Doležel - are not supposed to be "filled in", but to be contemplated as components of its semantics, particularly those displaying certain regularities.

Second alternative: a lacunary landscape construction is plausible in the phenomenologic concept of literary representation since it can - according to Ingarden - rely on our experience of space as a continuum and our understanding that a textual representation consists in a limited number of sentences that inevitably cannot comprehend the complex and continuous nature of space.

And eventually, the third, conditioned alternative: according to Eco and his "small world" concept presented in the eponymic essay, a schematic landscape construction is plausible even without "filling in" the blank space provided some particular cues are given (in Eco's example a few geographic names and cultural qualities such as "pastoral landscape" stand for a certain type of landscape). Such cues allow the reader to employ the convention of "superficiality", that is to agree on accepting the cues as sufficient and to pretend she knows only too well what the narrator talks about: both without wondering about the significance of the landscape suggested, and without the need to picture it in her mind.

Now I should like to put the alternatives on test by presenting exemplifications from a narrative where the landscape constructions can be neither denoted as highly saturated nor as lacunary. Still, readers - or a number of readers - find it extremely effective in inducing mental imagery: *The Hobbit* or *There and Back Again*.

I was not lucky enough to read *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* during what I would call the heroic period of my reading career, so I might have missed the occasion to join the fellowship of the devoted readers of the fellowship's adventures. Later, I was able to witness such experience in my then some ten years old son. As is typical of a parent with scholarly background, I tried to make him explain the reason of his fascination. "I feel as if I could see it with my own eyes", he said. "See what?", I insisted. "Everything, the hobbits marching on, the clouds in the sky, the hills, the trees, the plants, entire landscapes, just everything," he continued, growing a little impatient. Later on, I approached several "members of the fellowship", readers of different ages, with the same question - only to find out that they all insisted on the imaginative power of the Hobbit narrative. Since I myself could not remember being fascinated by landscape images in the storyworld, I started browsing the text in search for cues indicating landscape representation and felt disappointed to encounter relatively unspecific superficial expressions such as *dark forest* or *deep abyss*, that is spatial archetypes indispensable of any fantasy or any adventurous or

heroic genre. But the presence of a genre matrix or an inventory of motifs hardly possesses the imaginative power the readers claimed. Obviously, the matter required close reading. (And observation, since the the first representation of the fictional landscape encountered in the book is the one sketched in Thror's Map.)

Here I would like to invite you to follow the text step by step with me, since the strategy resulting in landscape mental imagery is developed from the very beginning of the narrative:

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, not yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing to sit down on or to eat; it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. (Tolkien 1990, 1)

- this is a perfect method how to trick the reader into adopting a positive attitude to hobbits from the very beginning - even without knowing yet who they are. What follows is a comprehensive account of the hobbit hole; if such a description were related to a traditional human housing, fantasy readers (or even students of literature) would start yawning and searching diagonally for linguistic cues of action to resume linear - that is worth-while reading. What is particular about the descriptive strategy in the *Hobbit* is transforming the topography of the hole as well as the relatively schematic description of its furnishing into *disclosing the life-style of the so far unfamiliar hobbit*; and again, the lifestyle is connected with very positive characteristics:

The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel; a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tilted and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats — the hobbit was fond of visitors. (Tolkien 1990, 1)

The construction of a fictional world unfamiliar to the reader is penetrated by a *rhetoric strategy* of what may be referred to as *familiarization*. While the Russian formalists introduced the *defamiliarization* as the basic principle of the artistic representation method, the cognitive narratologists managed to prove that it may be exactly the opposite that makes narrative structures work as well. After having won the reader's sympathy for the hobbit people, the narrator amplifies what is typical of narratives, that is the particularity of fictional entities, by a radical appropriation to the reader of a character that has remained unknown so far, thus forced to give his definitionlike description:

The mother of our particular hobbit. what is a hobbit? I suppose hobbit needs some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big

People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded Dwarves. (Tolkien 1990, 2)

What may be referred to as epic distance (be it designated simply as a temporal, not an ontological one ("nowadays" — "then") indicating that the reader may be prevented from encountering an individual of hobbit species, does not prevent the narrator from tricking the reader into "adopting" the particular hobbit: her, his — ours. As a result, the reader gets emotionally involved prior to the very beginning of the whole adventure. You may ask what this strategy has to do with landscape imaging? Let us demonstrate by exemplification that there are subtle signals (distributed in the whole narrative) which help to maintain this emotional mode:

Now they had gone on far into the Lone-lands, where there were no people left, no inns, and the roads grew steadily worse. Not far ahead were dreary hills, rising higher and higher, dark with trees. On some of them were castles with an evil look, as if they had been built by wicked people. (Tolkien 1990, 36)

Nevertheless, the crucial strategy that contributes to stimulating landscape imagery may be evidenced by confronting the two following paragraphs:

There seemed to be no trees and no valleys and no hills to break the ground in front of them, only one vast slope going slowly up and up to meet the feet of the nearest mountain, a wide land the colour of heather and moss-green showing where water might be. (Tolkien 1990, 53)

They came on unexpected valleys, narrow with deep sides, that opened suddenly at their feet, and they looked down surprised to see trees below them and running water at the bottom. There were gullies that they could almost leap over; but very deep with waterfalls in them. There were dark ravines one could neither jump nor climb into. There were bogs, some of them green pleasant places to look at with flowers growing bright and tall; but a pony that walked there with a pack on its back would never have come out again. (Tolkien 1990, 54)

Obviously, this is not a *typical landscape description* if what we have in mind is the *descriptive mode* or *textual type* since it does not comply with the idea of a *static* account of distinctive qualities of a subject, and their relations. But it is a typical way of *landscape construction* in *The Hobbit*: here, the fictional landscape is more frequently conveyed not just as "a here and now of the fictional world" — or, as *seen* (such as in the first part of our example) by a fictional observer — but as *physically experienced* by the characters, the prominent measure of its qualities being the physical competence of the little heroes, the hobbits.

To conclude, we may say that there is a plethora of aspects that contribute to the reception of *The Hobbit* as a narrative of extreme power to induce mental imagery in its recipients: it is the cult of Tolkien's, or more generally, fantasy and mythologic narration and stories featuring heroic quest that bring about great expectations in readers and a certain reception code, cultural schemes or archetypes that make up a certain matrix of the components and qualities of the genre, but the main source of this effect is

firstly: the rhetoric strategy of the narrator consisting in *familiarization* of the fictional world — that is the world of hobbits which is referred to as having — or having had — some interconnections with that of the readers, employed in order to win readers' sympathy for the characters and getting them emotionally involved in the story

secondly: the construction of the fictional world's landscapes consists in representing them the way they are *experienced by the characters* (hobbits) with their particular capabilities and confronted with the scales they employ when evaluating the outer world. In other words, the mental images of fictional landscapes do not emerge here from picturesque *descriptions or impressive metaphors but from the experiential mode of their representation.*

Thus, the obvious discrepancy between the relatively unspecific narrative (narrative including descriptive mode respectively) representation of landscape in the *Hobbit* and the resulting abundance of landscape images experienced by readers, may be explained neither by a semantic scheme, nor as visualizing of precise textual instructions, nor as arbitrary filling in of gaps legitimized by the continuity of actual space. The strategy employed here in the construction of fictional landscape is basically a *cognitive, experiential* one: it is not only images of landscapes what emerges in readers' minds, it is a complex of *quasi-sensorial experience of landscape*. Be it a landscape with comfortable hobbit-holes in the ground, or castles with an evil look - as if they had been built by wicked people.

References

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