Beware the Nothing: An Allegorical Reading of Ende's *The Neverending Story*

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Abstract
Gives “an allegorical reading of the translated text.” Sees it as an anti-deconstructionist defense of human imagination, and an actualization of a neo-Romantic and metaphysical world-view compatible with the theories of Lewis and Tolkien on fantasy and imagination.

Additional Keywords
Allegory in The Neverending Story; Deconstructionism and The Neverending Story; Ende, Michael. The Neverending Story—as allegory
Beware the Nothing
An Allegorical Reading of Ende's The Neverending Story

Kath Filmer

Michael Ende's fantasy The Neverending Story appeared quietly on the Australian scene several years ago. Attention has been drawn to the work only recently through the arrival of the film and the coincidental release of the paperback version of the book (which, incidentally, fails to reproduce the two-coloured text of the original) [1]. The film version disappointed me because it did not retain the book's thesis: the influence of Fantastica upon the mundane world. Nor did the film version make clear that the world of the human imagination has metaphysical value: the word "Fantasia" which the film-makers substitute for the original "Fantastica" symbolises the film's denuding the story of meaning. Another cavil I have against the film is that the idea of the "Neverending Story" is never developed as it is in the book. Indeed the film leaves the viewer completely in the dark about why the story is "neverending"; and it contradicts itself: having been told that the creatures of Fantastica cannot enter the real world, the audience then sees Bastian and the Luckdragon (who looks more like a Luck Dog) return to the scene of Bastian's humiliation at the hands of his tormentors.

Having expressed my regrets about the failure of the film version of The Neverending Story, however, I would like now to offer an allegorical reading of the translated text (Ende writes in German). In doing so, I assume that the translated text retains the tone and polemic slant of the original. Working from a translation precludes any systematic analysis of the language used in the story, so my remarks will be confined to elements of the plot and what I perceive as the thesis of the book.

First and foremost, I see Ende's story as a defense of the human imagination, but a defense so structured as to emphasize the truth-bearing capacity of that uniquely human faculty. Secondly, I see a subtle attack on the incipient nihilism of the present age and especially that which demolishes all meaning in the name of literary theory. Finally I see also in this book an actualization of the theories of Ende's predecessors C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien which does much to validate and substantiate a neo-Romantic and intensely metaphysical world view or Weltanschauung.

As an apologetic work which defends the role and importance of the human imagination, The Neverending Story is closely related in both style and substance to the writings of the Victorian clergyman George MacDonald. There is something about Bastian's simplicity and open-mindedness which brings to mind about Curdie and the hero of At the Back of the North Wind. The same qualities of whimsicality and mythopoiesis are present in Ende's work as in MacDonald's.

Bastian is himself a maker of fantasy. He tells Mr. Coreander that he has been derided by his schoolfriends for being a "Screwball nitwit, braggart [and a] liar" because "I think up stories. I invent names and words that don't exist..." (p. 5). Bastian's creativity is stimulated by his passion for books, a passion which, as an authorial intrusion advises us, we readers must share if we are to remain sympathetic to Bastian after he steals the mysterious book from Mr. Coreander. Indeed, we soon learn that the passion which impels Bastian is really a passion for objective values. The nihilism which pervades current philosophies and "critical approaches to literature" is addressed from the moment that Bastian settles himself in the school attic with the book:

"I wonder," he said to himself, "what's in a book while it's closed. Oh, I don't know it's full of letters printed on paper, but all the same, something must be happening, because as soon as I open it, there's a whole story with people I don't know yet and all kinds of adventures and deeds and battles. And sometimes there are storms at sea, or it takes you to strange cities and countries. All those things are somehow shut up in a book. Of course you have to read it to find out. But it's already there, that's the funny thing. I just wish I knew how it could be" (p. 11).

Is Bastian reflecting here upon the modern critical notion that a text does not exist until it is processed by the reader? It would certainly seem so: the most extreme form of nihilistic criticism, deconstruction, is comprised of theories which assert that "texts are no-where fully present [2], and that without the reader, there is neither message nor meaning [3].

Michael Ende does not dismiss the role of the reader: rather, he affirms it. The reader must be "drawn in," as it were, must actively participate in the text. Thus Bastian must give the Childlike Empress a new name in order to save Fantastica: he must participate in the process of imaginative sub-creation in the sense expressed by J.R.R. Tolkien in his Andrew Lang Memorial Lecture "On Fairy Stories." The story-maker makes a Secondary World which the mind of the reader may enter, and once there, the reader is held in a state of "secondary belief" — that is, he engages with the invented world on its own terms and according to its own laws [4]. Again, Tolkien's fellow Inking, C.S. Lewis observed that the power of David Lindsay's book A Voyage to Arcturus lies in the fact that "it is we ourselves and the author who walk through a world of spiritual dangers" [5]. Bastian must enter Fantastica: unless he does the story is simply repeated interminably. Without the active participation of the reader, there is a "Neverending story" contained between two boards. Once the reader participates, the story comes alive and the reader becomes involved in the secondary world.

Ende affirms Presence both authorial and textual. The text exists as the neverending story: Bastian's entry to it provides the transformation between mere text and imaginative activity. Ende sees the generative process as the meeting of imagination — the author's as well as the reader's. The interaction is vital to the life of Fantastica. It is not enough that the author creates a new world: the reader must engage with
We term metaphysics of illusory "supplements". Metaphysics rests on the possibility of compensating for a primordial non-presence by way of supplement." (Harari, p. 37.) "Supplements," in Derridean terms is something added to rectify a lack of deficiency. Western metaphysics consists of illusory "supplements" including those of God and the Self. Deconstruction seeks to expose the illusions and replace them with Nothing, much as Ende's "Nothing" does in (illusory?) Fantastica.

Ende allows Bastian to enter Fantastica and to defeat the Nothing by recreating the Imaginary world, but Bastian begins to use his creative power for self-serving ends. Each time he makes a wish, however, he loses part of his memory and, at last, he forgets his very name. The use of the power of Imagination for selfish ends leads not to the true Fantastica, but only to a lie. Bastian must surrender all the gifts he has gained in Fantastica in order to become human again; he is permitted to take with him some of the Water of Life, the source of Fantastican power, back to his father.

Bastian, back in the real world, relates his adventures to his father, and sees in his father's tears that he has passed on to him the gift of the Water of Life. The lonely boy heals Fantastica of the ravages of Nothing; Fantastica heals the rift of loneliness and grief between the boy and his father. Thus Ende shows that the power of the Imagination and the magical worlds it can create serve not only as escape from mundane difficulties but as healing for them. Humanity is complete only when the Imagination is free to function selflessly in the creation of new worlds in which others may share. Ende has given us what Tolkien has said is gained by all readers of fairy stories — Escape, Recovery, and Consolation. ("On Fairy-Stories," pp. 57-72 passim.)

By Escape is meant "the escape of the prisoner"; thus Bastian escapes the prison of loneliness, sensitivity and alienation from his father by becoming a hero in Fantastica. Recovery refers to the return to the real world able to view it with fresh eyes, able to bring to it a healing made possible by the encounter, in the fantastic world, with real and simple things clothed in the robes of Imagination. Bastian returns, healed of his hurt, and brings healing to his father, a healing that in turn benefits Bastian and continues the healing process.

Consolation, according to Tolkien, is the "good catastrophe," the sudden joyous turn of the happy ending: "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...." (Lit., p. 66.)

Ende has created a fairy tale within a fairy tale, and both supply these three elements, a reassurance that the Nothing can be no threat to the human imagination, since it is nothing, and human creation is creation ex nihilo. In spite of the learned philosophizing that asserts only nothing and illusion, the human imagination triumphs and allows us to bring the Water of Life back into the mundane world and to enrich it.

It is worth contrasting the language of the Fantasy writers with that of the Deconstructors. The latter use obscure polysyllabic forms to describe all existence, human or literary, as illusion; the former use concrete terms and positive values to affirm human existence and its enrichment by the link between mundanity and the supernatural provided by the Imagination. Reading Ende's work an allegory allows an appreciation of it as an affirmation of positive metaphysical and ontological values and as a means of the "Recovery" in Tolkien's sense, of a fresh view of mundane reality. The threat of the Nothing is nothing; and the reader fulfills in part the prophecy of Dame Eyolla:

"...sometime in the distant future humans
Ende's double Fairy Story draws us in with Bastian to the marvellous world of Fantastica. But primarily it draws us in to Bastian's world, so that we feel with him the gamut of emotions that he experiences. We emerge from Bastian's story enriched by the magic of a small boy and his attempts to win the attention and love of his grieving father. As C.S. Lewis observes, the Fantastical or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevances. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life', can add to it. [8]

Ende's work provides evidence for the veracity of Lewis's theory, and supports the necessary of elements "well-used by the author" meeting "the right reader": both are essential to the construction of meaning and to participation in the secondary world. Of course, Ende's book is much more than an allegory, but that demands more space than this paper allows. As an allegory, however, it affirms the value of the Fantastic as a means of "adding to life" and entrenches Ende's place as the writer of fantasy among the ranks of the masters, Lewis, Tolkien and MacDonald.

NOTES

[8] C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What's to be Said", in Of This and Other Worlds, pp. 74-75.

Mythopoesis, continued from page 16

'Take the hilts,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this.' 'I am,' said Pippin. (RK, p. 30-31)

In this scene, Tolkien uses the formula of swearing on the hilts of the sword. He also repeats the tense atmosphere which is evident in the example cited in Fian and Hengesat.