



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 12 | Number 4 | Issue 46, Summer

Article 10

6-15-1986

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Recommended Citation

Filmer, Kath (1986) "Beware the Nothing: An Allegorical Reading of Ende's *The Neverending Story*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 12 : No. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss4/10>

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

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 mythopoeia 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 Inklings, 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 imaginations — 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

it, but to do so there must already be in existence the secondary, created world.

It is significant that Ende chooses for his villain a nihilistic threat called "the Nothing." The "Nothing" eradicates imaginative constructs -- that is, the scenery of Fantastica, its creatures and its buildings. It is not, as the film version has it, a rush of clouds and wind: it is simply nothing:

"Something has happened in Moldymoor," said the will-o'-the-wisp haltingly, "something impossible to understand. Actually, it's still happening. It's hard to describe -- the way it began was -- well, in the east of our country there's a lake -- that is, there was a lake -- Lake Foamingbroth we called it. Well, the way it began was like this. One day Lake Foamingbroth wasn't there anymore -- it was gone. See?"

"You mean it dried up?" Gluckuk inquired.

"No," said the will-o'-the-wisp. "Then there'd be a dried-up lake. But there isn't; where the lake used to be there's nothing -- absolutely nothing. Now do you see?"

"A hole?" the rock chewer grunted.

"No, not a hole," said the will-o'-the-wisp despairingly. "A hole after all, is something. This is nothing at all." (p. 19.)

Since "nothing at all" is the essence of Derridean deconstruction Ende's "Nothing" works powerfully as a symbol, since the "Nothing" devours the elements of the imaginative secondary world and threatens the Childlike Empress herself -- the focus of human imagination and creation. M.H. Abrams sees Derrida's "continual deferring of presence" as a reduction of texts (imaginative constructs) to "a sealed echo chamber in which meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly nonpresence emanating from no voice, intended by no-one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void" [6]. Indeed, the destructive aim of deconstruction is overtly expressed in the terms deconstructors themselves apply to their theories: "rhetorical pre-emptive strike" and "disruption" [7].

Ende comes closest to an identification of his "Nothing" in the admission of Gmork (the werewolf) that he had a mission to carry out to facilitate the destruction of Fantastica: "Those whom I served decided that Fantastica must be destroyed," he tells Atreyu (p. 136). Gmork is wicked, we learn, "Because you creatures had a world, and I didn't" (p. 135). The deconstructors deny themselves a world, denying all sense of Presence; it is their aim to deny all others their worlds be they material, imaginative or spiritual. Their philosophy is metaphysically and ontologically negative and "consists of showing that the whole edifice of Western metaphysics rests on the possibility of compensating for a primordial non-presence by way of supplement." (Harari, p. 37.) "Supplement," 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; and 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 as evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy...." (Ibid., p. 68.)

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 philosophising 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 as 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 Eyla:

"...sometime in the distant future humans

will bring love to Fantastica. Then the two worlds will be one." (p. 367.)

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 Fantastic 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 irrelevancies. 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 necessity 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 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

- [1] Michael Ende, The Neverending Story. Trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Allen Lane, 1983).
- [2] Josue V. Harari, "Preface" to Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism (of which he is editor) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 37.
- [3] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", in Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Becket (Baltimore, 1974) quoted by Susan K. Suleiman in her Introduction to The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 44.
- [4] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories", in Tree and Leaf (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), pp. 40-42.
- [5] C.S. Lewis, "On Stories", in Of This and Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1982), p. 35.
- [6] M.H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel", in Critical Inquiry 3 (1977), quoted by Suleiman, cit. supra, pp. 42-43.
- [7] Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 108.
- [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 Finn and Hengest.

Merry's offering service to Theoden has a completely different tone to it.

'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Theoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service if you will!'

'Gladly will I take it,' said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, blessed him. 'Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan of the house-hold of Meduseld!' he said. 'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!'

'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry.

'For a little while,' said Theoden. (RK, p.59).

This scene follows the second example Tolkien had offered in the Beowulf study. It contains the offer of the sword as part of a gift of vassalship, and the personal relationship between the lord and warrior wherein the lord stands as father to his follower.

By placing the two scenes from The Lord of the Rings beside the examples of sword-oaths from the far older literature Tolkien knew in his role as scholar, one can see an example of specific derivation. Tolkien took something he knew well and absorbed it into his Sub-creation. The incidents in his fiction are not copies of events he knew as a scholar, rather they are the imagined children of those events. They exist not to display customs about sword-oaths, but rather to display character traits of the two hobbits. Pippin is moved by stung pride, the same pride that had been caught in the palantir's spell. Merry, however, responds to Theoden the man with love, responds with willing service to Theoden King.

The fact that Tolkien's fictive incidents are evidently derived from his scholarly examples does not imply that it was a conscious connection in his mind at the time he was writing The Lord of the Rings. In the introduction to Finn and Hengest, Alan Bliss makes clear that Tolkien gave his Beowulf lectures many times over the course of his whole career. The examples of sword-oaths were likely, then, to be part of the background fabric of Tolkien's imagination. It is the background fabric of any Sub-creator's imagination which shapes the details of the Secondary world. Anything that one has studied and absorbed with interest may provide the sort of enriching detail, as these two types of oath-taking provide in The Lord of the Rings.

Leaf and Key, continued from page 29

Niggle before his Tree because of the many seedlings within my own soul that I would have come to maturity someday. I laugh in the Mountains, knowing that if I do not paint them high and beautiful and far away, there are many who have and maybe it will not be a bad thing to be a Parish. Allegory does not reach that deeply.

A little story, this "Leaf by Niggle"; but like Atkins, I can't get it out of my mind.