

Maria Barbu

Babel, a Neverending Story?

Language and Fantasy Identities

Abstract: The end of the 19th century brought a major change in regards to humanity's relationship with divinity and with the idea of creation.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, 'God is dead', so no one holds the supreme authority upon the creation act anymore. As a result, man himself began to create fictional worlds through *logos*, in order to fill the void left by the disappearance of divinity. Among the many methods that explain the generative process of these worlds there is the archetypal one from the Jungian psychology, the relational one from reader-response theories and the 'chaotic', theoretically objective one, based on hazard theories. Starting from here, this essay will try to analyze comparatively Michael Ende's novel, *The Neverending Story*, and Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *The Library of Babel*, with the purpose of exploring the contrast that is prefigured – at a structural, interpretive and text-reader relationship level – between the unconscious and the mechanical patterns of creating new worlds.

Keywords: Fictional Worlds; Reader-Response Theories; Archetypes; Fantasy; Combinatorial Mechanisms.

MARIA BARBU

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
maria.barbu@stud.ubbcluj.ro

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The active role and the freedom that readers have in interpreting the texts that they read are explained in detail by researchers such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish or Normand Holland. Nevertheless, the novel perspective that I intend to approach in this study underlines the fact that a subjective thing like the human psyche creates meaningful worlds which depend entirely on the particularities of the one who imagines them, whereas the objective principle of a never-ending recombination of symbols inevitably leads to confusion and disorder.

Around the 1970s, the critics' vision upon the act of reading began to change and the reader-response theories became the interpretation grid through which the texts were being looked at. Unlike the principles of New Criticism (1940-1950), which did not grant the reader any role in creating the meaning of a literary work, the reader-response theories do exactly the opposite: they emphasize the fact that a text's meanings are not unilaterally and objectively transmitted by the author precisely because the readers are not passive consumers of literature. On the contrary, they project onto the text their own interpretations and they add to it a new meaning with each

act of reading they perform. In this way, 'a written text is not an object, despite its physical existence, but an event that occurs within the reader, whose response is of primary importance in creating the text'¹. In the following pages, this paper will briefly analyze the five approaches that can be found among these theories (transactional reader-response theory, affective stylistics, subjective reader-response theory, psychological reader-response theory, and social reader-response theory) and will establish the necessary connections between them and the literary texts that are the main subject of this research.

Transactional reader-response theory belongs to Louisa Rosenblatt and consists in a relation of *stimulus* and effect between the text and the reader: the text triggers certain memories, previous knowledge, feelings and associations inside the reader's subconscious, which automatically affect his way of perceiving the written source. But in order for this 'transaction' to take place, it is necessary for the reader to look at the text through an aesthetic grid, which stresses the reader's empathy with the characters, rather than through a practical one, which would focus on assimilating the information transmitted by the text. As a consequence, depending on the cultural base or on the previous experiences of each reader, the text receives a variety of meanings which are all valid exactly due to the fact that it does not have a fixed sense, but it can adapt to every perspective from which it is seen².

Affective stylistics is a concept associated with the name of Stanley Fish and can be defined as 'a cognitive analysis of the mental processes produced by specific elements in the text'³. This theory argues

that the text has to be seen as an event that occurs in time and whose meanings consist in the experiences through which the readers go as they are reading. To put it in another way, the accent falls upon the way in which the text is constructed within the reader through reading and upon the many cases in which even the writing style mirrors different stages through which the reader goes in his reading experience.

Stanley Fish's studies also tackle the role that the interpretive community to which the readers belong has upon the individual perspective from which they look at literature. In his social reader-response theory, Fish talks about the idea according to which there are multiple institutionalized assumptions which we hear around us and which we assimilate, consciously or not, using them in our own reactions towards the texts we read. Therefore, depending on what we are taught in school or within the family about deciphering a written source, we will always approach them with those certain predispositions that function in society in that respective moment. Taking into account even the simple example of a poem whose characteristics we do not identify in the verses themselves, but through the interpretive strategies that taught us to recognize them, it can be easily observed how an individual's reading grid is not only influenced by the patterns in which he/she is taught to get close to literature, but also controlled by the relatively limited repertoire of interpretive strategies that are available to them in a certain moment of time⁴.

Another approach, suggestively named 'subjective reader-response theory' and based on the work of critics such as David Bleich, starts from the principle according

to which knowledge is subjective because we cannot really know how an object looks when we are not watching it. Therefore, neither the text exists outside the interpretations that the readers make of it: it has ontological value only in the reader's mind and only because it is read and 'brought to life' by them. Moreover, these critics' studies have also examined the reading experience and the way in which readers react to the contact with a certain text, so as to identify precisely the passages that trigger emotional reactions and to take a closer look to the ways and reasons because of which the readers empathize with those fragments⁵.

Finally, probably the most relevant reader-response theory for this essay is the psychological one, a concept through which Norman Holland moves the accent from what the readers' interpretation says about the text on what it indicates about the readers' own psyche. More specifically, Holland argues that people react to texts in the same way in which they react to real events, i.e. they will perceive the phrases they read according to the mental images which they associate them with (if, for example, they use to avoid alcoholic persons due to a childhood trauma, they will have the same attitude towards the literary characters of this type). In other words, our subconscious influences the way in which we interact with a book: 'we unconsciously recreate in the text the world that exists in our own mind. Our interpretations, then, are products of the fears, defences, needs and desires we project onto the text'⁶.

According to Holland, literary interpretation thus becomes a psychological act rather than an intellectual one, an act that can reveal the text's meanings, but also one that, first and foremost, illustrates the

reader's personality. The three stages of the interpretive process can be summarized in the following manner: *the defence mode* (in which 'our psychological defences are raised by the text'), *the fantasy mode* (where 'we find a way to interpret the text that will tranquilize those defences and thus fulfill our desire to be protected from threats to our psychological equilibrium') and *the transformation mode*

(where 'we transform the first two steps into an abstract interpretation so that we can get the psychological satisfaction we desire without acknowledging to ourselves the anxiety-producing defences and guilt-producing fantasies that underlie our assessment of the text. Thus [...] we focus on an intellectual interpretation of the text in order to avoid our own emotional response to it, and we ignore the fact that our intellectual interpretation grew out of our emotional response')⁷.

But all of these reader-response theories underline one and the same thing: the message of a text is received differently by each reader because there are many psychological, social and cultural factors that influence everyone's reading experience. Within the next pages, this essay will attempt to illustrate the various dimensions in which Michael Ende's text confirms the reader's decisive role in constructing the meaning of a text, while also explaining, up to a certain point, the ambiguity that surrounds the existence of a volume entitled *The Neverending Story* in the world of the characters from the homonymous novel.

At a first glance, Ende's book seems to be a simple story for children. It describes

the adventures and the self-evolution of an eleven-year-old boy who makes direct contact with the world of books, but the fact that Bastian literally 'enters' in the book that he reads and manages to change the fictional world according to his own desires proves the high complexity that characterizes, in fact, the volume. Firstly, there is a certain multi-dimensionality of the writing which allows for multiple interconnections to be made between the narrative layers: the reality in which the readers hold and read Ende's book overlaps with the fictional world from within the book, where Bastian also reads a book entitled *The Neverending Story*. In its turn, this world opens further into Fantastica, the chronotope created by the protagonist's subconscious where there is, once again, the character of the Old Man from the Wandering Mountain who writes *The Neverending Story* as it happens and we read it. These three worlds are connected even by the librarian, Mr. Carl Conrad Coreander, who tells Bastian that 'one thing is sure: You didn't steal this book from me, because it belongs neither to me nor to you nor to anyone else. If I'm not mistaken, the book itself comes from Fantastica. Maybe at this very moment – who knows? – someone else is reading it'⁸.

Secondly, in the lack of something to certainly attest the physical existence of the book outside Fantastica or its story and significations being identical for every reader, the author further emphasizes the major role that these receivers of the literary message have in establishing the fictional coordinates and the sense of a text. The ambiguity due to which the borders between reality and fiction are removed also involves a series of considerations about the liberty of text interpretation:

Ende's text contains two stories that mirror each other – one whose protagonists are Atreyu and the Childlike Empress (a story which can be seen as the world imagined by Mr. Coreander after reading *The Neverending Story*, whose written version gets stolen and read by Bastian), and another one in which Bastian himself is the protagonist, together with Moon Child (a narrative that represents his own version of *The Neverending Story* and which is read by us, the readers from reality). Therefore, although Mr. Coreander admits his visit to Fantastica, his experience differed from Bastian's precisely because each reader creates his own version of the fictional world with which he/she makes contact, just as the reader-response theories claim. Moreover, this infinite chain of interpretations which are born from one another also sheds a different light on the concepts of 'author', 'character' and 'reader': their attributions intersect to the point in which the last one, just like the former two, ends up being the one that constructs the plot and gives shape to the text's possible interpretations ('He, Bastian, was a character in the book which until now he had thought he was reading. And heaven only knew who else might be reading it at the exact same time, also supposing himself to be just a reader'⁹).

However, despite the fact that every text *can* be read and interpreted over and over again by different readers, these interpretations cannot pass on from a reader (whether fictional or not) to another unless each of them generates, in their turn, their own version of the fictional world about which they read (Fantastica, in this case). It is thus essential to stop and analyze the archetypal scheme from the Jungian

psychology, which contributes in a great measure to the creation and organization of the ideas and imagines that our subconscious generates as a response to the external stimuli. Carl Gustav Jung juggles with many terms in order to explain the way in which the human mind works, but one of the crucial ones is definitely the 'collective unconscious', strongly connected to the one of 'archetype'. In his volume entitled *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, these two terms are defined as follows:

The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition. While the personal unconscious is made up essentially of contents which have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed, the contents of the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity. [...] The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere¹⁰.

It can thus be observed that all humans (including the literary characters which have them as models) function based on some internal structures that manifest in most of the key-moments from their life,

even if this happens at the unconscious level of the mind. Among these archetypes we can find the 'anima', the 'libido', the 'wise old man' or the 'maternal/paternal imago', about which we shall demonstrate that they are the main reason for which the word imagined by Bastian (his *Fantastica*) looks the way it does. In addition, considering the fact that the sequence of fantasies that is brought to surface 'relieves the unconscious and produces material rich in archetypal images and associations'¹¹, it will be easy to also discover the connections between the protagonist's repressed desires and the fantasy world that his imagination creates.

Fantastica has the Childlike Empress (lately named Moon Child by Bastian) as its centre, the being who rules 'over all the innumerable provinces of the Fantastican Empire', but she does that in a unique way: 'she didn't rule, she had never used force or made use of her power. She never issued commands and she never judged anyone. She never interfered with anyone [...]'. However, all the other creatures were depending on her existence, because 'without her, nothing could have lived, any more than a human body can live if it has lost its heart'¹². Due to these features, we can associate the Empress with the *anima* archetype, which 'is regarded as the feminine and chthonic part of the soul'¹³, as 'the inner figure of woman held by a man'¹⁴. Since she is the sovereign of Bastian's unconsciousness, she is also the Sovereign of Desires, namely the one with whose help the boy can reconstruct *Fantastica* according to his own will. This is also why she doesn't tell right from wrong and she never uses her power to change the course of events: following only the pleasure principle, like the

id, her character underlines the idea that everything is equal within the realm of the subconscious and that you can do everything you want there, as there are no rules of conduct that you have to follow.

Another essential point in Fantastica's structure is Auryrn, the medallion that gives its bearer the power of the Empress and that, due to the fact that it sets things in motion and it allows Bastian to fulfill his desires in order to find his true will (through the inscription 'Do what you wish'), it also represents the symbol of the *libido*, the *vital energy* or the *life drive*. This can be defined as the psychic energy that dynamizes desires; accordingly, the medallion gives Bastian the power to create worlds precisely because his latent creativity and wishes need that 'life drive' and its generative power in order to function. The image from the amulet, with the two snakes biting each other's tail, forming an oval, alludes to a double 'ouroboros', a symbol that 'suggests a primal state involving darkness and self-destruction as well as fecundity and potential creativity. It portrays the stage which exists before delineation and separation of the opposites'¹⁵. In addition to this, the sign illustrates the binding between the real world (the consciousness) and the fantasy world (the unconsciousness) or between the 'life drive' and the 'death drive', therefore demonstrating how crucial it is that the balance between these extremes is kept and also suggesting the conflict resolution and the self-discovery that Bastian achieves at the end of the book.

Despite this, there are two problems that Bastian has to confront during his journey through his unconscious, both being tightly connected to the dangers that

the psychical imbalance implies. On the one hand, his excessive desire of becoming emperor in Fantastica and of remaining there forever proves the fact that his ego wants to take over an archetype of the unconscious (the *anima*) and to remain the master of this space filled with phantasms. This would mean that, in his ordinary daily life, Bastian would lose his minds and the contact with the surrounding reality as well. On the other hand, the main consequence of the state in which the unconsciousness takes control is that the respective person also loses any connection to their own identity. The compensatory world that Bastian imagines in order to fulfill his wishes and solve the frustrations from his real life are based on the boy's memories, which nonetheless keep disappearing as long as the fiction in which he can do what he wants becomes more and more complex. In other words, fulfilling one's wishes destroys any memory of the fact that one wanted those things, as well as the reasons for which one had so many repressed frustrations: 'The amulet gives you great power, it makes all your wishes come true, but at the same time it takes something away: your memory of your world'¹⁶; 'Without AURYRN's power you can't wish yourself ahead, but with AURYRN's power you're losing yourself and forgetting where you want to go. Pretty soon, unless we do something about it, you won't have any idea where you're going'¹⁷. In this way, the paradox will take Bastian up to the point in which he will lose himself completely and he will almost die because of his inability to make wishes anymore, all in order for him to be reborn in the Water of Life and to return to his world, where his psychical balance will be restored too.

Besides these two already mentioned major archetypes, on which the genesis of *Fantastica* is mainly based, there are also a couple of smaller principles. Their presence makes certain references to the reader-response theories as well, but they also contribute to the shaping of the reasons why something as subjective as an eleven-year-old boy's unconscious is capable of creating such a perfectly functional world as *Fantastica* is. One of them is the Old Man from the Wandering Mountain, a character who stands for the archetype of sense due to the order he brings in *Fantastica* through guiding the events and writing the story as it keeps happening at infinity. The old wise man is also a 'mana-personality', an archetype which represents the 'all-pervading vital force', 'the quasi-divine power which adheres to the magician, mediator, priest, doctor, trickster, saint or holy fool – to anyone who partakes of the spirit world sufficiently to conduct or radiate its energy'. Usually, this figure 'appears whenever the ego is consciously confronted with the SELF', a meeting 'after which one has a renewed sense of individuality'¹⁸. Within the narrative frame, the old man could be a mirror-image of the author, who is capable of both entering his characters' unconsciousness and ordering his own thoughts so as his story to be meaningful and coherent. On the other hand, we should also keep in mind Atreyu's and Bastian's essential role in creating *Fantastica*'s significations: just like the readers who cross the literary space through reading and build their own interpretations starting from that, the two protagonists give meaning to their world through crossing it and solving its problems.

Another two archetypes, whose presence in *Fantastica*'s structure is mainly motivated by the fact that Bastian is a child, are the *maternal* and the *paternal imago*. The premature loss of his mother is a trauma which the boy isn't able to overcome, and the distant relationship that he has with his father is one more cause for the depression that he can barely keep at distance. Therefore, the character of Dame Eyola appears in Bastian's life when he wishes to be loved just as he is, 'good or bad, handsome or ugly, clever or stupid, with all his faults – or possibly because of them'¹⁹, and she gives the boy precisely that unconditioned affection and maternal protection that he has never experienced before. In this way, starting from qualities that come from the archetypal structure of the mother (such as 'maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility, the place of magic transformation and rebirth'²⁰), Bastian's unconsciousness solves the absence of the maternal figure through the meeting with Dame Eyola and it enriches *Fantastica* with yet another character generated as an answer to his internal needs.

At the opposite end, the *paternal imago* proves to be the last piece of puzzle that Bastian needs in order to succeed to return to the real world and the only memory that, at the end of his journey, keeps him tied to his conscious life. The crystal with the image of his father, the one he finds among people's thousands of forgotten dreams (so within the collective unconscious), represents another phantasm which manages

to reach the surface and to remind the boy why he must do everything to return to his imperfect, yet real life.

Finally, Bastian's personality itself is divided in three parts, each of them marking a stage of his journey of loss and self-discovery. His simple ego, from the real world, is the protagonist of quite an unhappy life, which is why his subconscious is so full of unfulfilled and repressed wishes: at only eleven-years-old, Bastian is too fat for his age, he is bullied by his classmates, he doesn't have friends or a good academic situation and he is also devoid of the usual parental affection necessary for his age. As a result, in *Fantastica*, his ideal ego is completely different from the real one, built in correspondence with the way in which Bastian wishes he would look and would be perceived by others: as an oriental prince, tall, skinny and beautiful, appreciated by everyone because he is *Fantastica's* savior and because he can give a personal history to all its inhabitants. The third form, personified by Atreyu, is Bastian's alter-ego or the ideal of his ego, more specifically the model towards which he aspires and whose heroic journey he will almost entirely repeat during his stay in *Fantastica*. These three parts of Bastian's psyche prove the complexity which, despite the appearances, characterizes the inner nature of a child, while also explaining what triggers the changes which the protagonist undergoes throughout his journey through the subconscious.

We have thus seen how Bastian's vision about *Fantastica's* organization is influenced and structured by the way in which his unconscious processes his traumas and his repressed wishes, transforms them in fulfilled wishes in the fictional

world and generates an entire world based on a series of Jungian archetypes. Although everything seems a simple imaginative game that starts from an act of reading, what the protagonist actually does in *Fantastica* has a sense and a certain order only because it is the product of a subjective creator, the reader, whose unconscious projects its phantasms over that text and so it gives it the human factor that it needs in order to 'come to life'.

At the opposite end there is the objective principle of generating texts, which is based on the infinite combination of the alphabet's letters. In theory, this mechanism is the perfect method through which man can get access to absolutely all possible texts, including the ones that could solve the most serious problems which humanity has faced throughout history. However, in practice, the result is a chaotic one which produces confusion and anxiety to those who confront it, because an infinity of texts where most of them are senseless combinations of letters and only a few tell a coherent story from beginning to end is an overwhelming problem even for the most experienced readers. All of these ideas are examined in Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *The Library of Babel*, so this paper will further analyze it in the next paragraphs, while also comparing this mechanical creation of fictional worlds with the archetypal principle and the reader-response theories that we have applied in the case of *The Neverending Story*.

Leaving aside the type of interpretation that explores the universe-library metaphor, I shall direct my attention solely on the implications carried by the existence of a space which contains, in one single place, all the possible combinations of letters and

punctuation marks. At the beginning of his story, Borges says that

the Library is 'total'—perfect, complete, and whole—and that its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite)—that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. *All* —the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the *true* catalog, the gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary upon that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book into every language, the interpolations of every book into all books"²¹.

It is essential to note the fact that this library is not a usual one: it does not only contain all the books that have ever been written, but all the combinations of letters and signs that can form volumes of four hundred and ten pages. As a result, 'the human factor' (the author who puts the words on the page in a certain order, so that the story he wants to say has a meaning, and also the reader who creates new meanings through his own interpretation of the text) disappears entirely and it is replaced by a combinatory mechanism that produces, inevitably, chaos, confusion and anxiety. Due to the lack of a catalogue with all the volumes and a list that would separate the few coherent works from the overwhelming

number of those without sense or utility, the library of Babel remains a place where you can never find exactly what are you looking for, although anything you would need is for sure to be found there.

Other important elements from the library's structure are the mirrors from the corridors, which reflect the surrounding shelves and thus create the impression that the place is bigger than it actually is. Taking into consideration the two types of opinions related to this aspect – 'men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite. . .'²² –, we can also go back to *The Neverending Story* and to the principle of the interpretations that multiply with each reader that makes contact with a certain text. As I have already mentioned, the twenty five symbols which Borges talks about can give birth to a very large number of combinations; from those, the ones that form coherent volumes from beginning to end can also be the starting point for just as many different interpretations as there are readers. In a phrase that combines all of the three methods of generating fictional worlds that I have analyzed in this essay, it could be said that letters are the basis for every story, and every story (including *The Library of Babel*, one of the billion combinations of these signs) is 'a neverending story' because it can always be re-experienced, reinterpreted and recreated according to the expectations, the previous experiences and the psychical structure of its readers.

All in all, as a conclusion, a contrastive revision of the particularities of the two texts that I have analyzed will further underline

the reasons why, from the viewpoint of the obtained result, the creation of fictional worlds led by unconscious patterns (*The Neverending Story*), although subjective and unreliable, is superior to the mechanical one, which is realized automatically and objectively through letter recombination (Borges' machine). On the one hand, there is Fantastica, the fictional world from Michael Ende's book, which takes shape inside Bastian's mind and it is structured in such a way as to fulfill all of his repressed wishes from the real world. The psychoanalytic lens through which we have analyzed this text revealed Jungian archetypes such as the *anima*, the *maternal* or *paternal imago*, the *libido*, the *alter-ego* etc., therefore we were able to observe how they give meaning and direction to the new world, ordering it according to the psychical structure of the one creating it. Extrapolating, we have extended this generative method at an ontologically superior level as well: in reality, during the act of reading, each book receives a new dimension inside the mind of the reader, a dimension that reflects his/her psyche and that leads afterwards to a new interpretation of that respective text. An infinite chain of 'rewritings through reading'

is thus created; however, it cannot function in the absence of the subjectivity and creative imagination which characterizes each act of reading separately. On the other hand, there is The Library of Babel, which contains all the books that have ever been written and that could be written in the future, but not the human factor that could give them sense and order – this one being replaced by an automatic mechanism. For this reason, the senseless letters combinations are so many, that any attempt to find a certain text, which would also be coherent from beginning to end, is bound to fail.

Overall, even though the objectivity and complexity of this mechanical method of creating fictional worlds should make it the perfect way to discover the mysteries of the universe, the overwhelming number of the possible combinations and the impossibility of ever acknowledging them all only underlines the fact that, eventually, it is better to move forward with small steps and to discover yourself and the world bit by bit, with every book that you are reading, instead of having them all at your disposition and not being able to find, in fact, none that would truly make sense.

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NOTES

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3. *Ibidem*, pp. 175-178.
4. *Ibidem*, pp. 185-186.
5. *Ibidem*, pp. 178-180.
6. *Ibidem*, pp. 182-183.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 184.
8. Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, translated by Ralph Manheim, illustrated by Roswitha Quadflieg, Dutton Children's Books, New York, 1997, p. 420.
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