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## A Journey through Fantastica

### ABSTRACT

This study concerns Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*. The first part of it is dedicated to the presentation of this fantastic epic novel, taking into consideration metafictional devices, name symbolism, character and situation archetypes, plot, the moral of the story. The second part of the work is trying to find the answer to questions like: "What is Fantastica?", "How is it related to the human realm?", "What does the concept of "nothing" represent?", "What is the role of imagining in our life?".

### KEYWORDS

Michael Ende; *The Neverending Story*; Fantasy; Metafiction; Archetype; Quest; Myth; Psyche.

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Originally published as *Die unendliche Geschichte* in 1979, Michael Ende's brilliant, kaleidoscopic fantasy work *The Neverending Story* was translated into many languages, sold millions of copies and was even made into a film in 1984. The protagonist of this famous work is ten-year-old Bastian Balthazar Bux, an apparently ordinary schoolboy who has the gift of making up "names and words that do not exist" and whose passion for books makes him steal *The Neverending Story*.

The novel uses common metafictional devices: it is a book about a reader reading a book whose characters are aware that they are part of it, a fiction containing another work of fiction within itself, a book in which the book itself seeks interaction with the reader and also a story about a writer creating a fictional world.

While we are reading a book called *The Neverending Story*, Bastian is also reading it and, as he reads further, it becomes obvious to him that his reality and the fictional kingdom of Fantastica are intertwined. By the end of the first part of the novel, after the Old Man of the Wandering Mountain re-reads the *Neverending Story* from the start<sup>1</sup>, Bastian enters the fantasy world. Once in Fantastica, he rebuilds the kingdom with his own imaginative powers.

The names of characters and places that appear in the story are symbolic, illustrative for what they represent, according to



the principle that the name of a thing and the thing itself are one: *The Neverending Story*, *Fantastica*, *the Childlike Empress*, *the Great Quest*, *the Magic Mirror Gate*, *the Mountain of Destiny*, *the House of Change*, *Uyulala* (*ululare* means in Latin *to howl*), *Dame Eyola* (*aiuola* means *flower-bed* in Italian), etc.

Many of the characters represent archetypes: *the hero* (Atreyu, Bastian), *the damsel in distress*, *the virgin* (the Childlike Empress), *the wise* (the Childlike Empress, Morla, The Old Man of Wandering Mountain, the Many-Colored Death Grogaman), *the aged one* (Morla, The Old Man of Wandering Mountain), *the friendly beast* (Artax, the luckdragon Falkor), *the creature of nightmare* (Gmork), *the psychopomp*, *the gatekeeper* (the man in the old book store, the Childlike Empress, Gmork, the two snakes, the two sphinxes), *the temptress* (Xayide: “My will can control anything that’s empty”), *the mother* (Dame Eyola), *the group of companions* (Atreyu and Falkor), etc.

The situations are also archetypal: *the father-son conflict*, *the Great Quest* for the saving of Fantastica, *the task* of finding a cure for the Childlike Empress, *the initiation* into the adult life of both Atreyu and Bastian, *the journey* that demands the full responsibility of the hero, *the fall* (Bastian’s loss of innocence and bliss), *death and rebirth* (the rewriting of the neverending story, the destruction and the rebirth of Fantastica, the falling to sleep and the awakening of the Lord of the Desert of Colors, Dame Eyola, who blossoms and dies again and again, the silvery white and the black snakes who hold each other prisoner, encircling the great fountain of the Water of Life), *the battle between good and evil* (Fantastica triumphs against its destruction), there is a *magical weapon* (the AURYN), etc.

The first twelve chapters of the work revolve around the quest of Atreyu, seen by the critics as an alter ego, a projection of

Bastian into a fantasy world, while the second part of the novel concerns the transformation undergone by Bastian. Atreyu’s quest is pure fakery, for the Golden-eyed Commander of Wishes already knows what’s wrong with her. She only needs an adventure, a spectacle to find a reader, for the only person who can fix the situation is the human child who reads the book.

Still, Atreyu doesn’t know this in the beginning, so he gives up his initiation as a hunter to leave on a “much greater hunt” that implies an even higher stake: it is the Great Quest of saving Fantastica. His only weapon for this demanding task is AURYN, the talisman containing the power and the guidance of the Childlike Empress. The journey takes him through various places (the Silver Mountains, the Singing Tree Country, the Glass Tower of Eribo, the broad plateau of the Sassafranians) until, on the seventh day of his trip, in the Howling Forest, he gets of glimpse of the mysterious disease that is destroying Fantastica.

Continuing his quest, Atreyu gets through the Swamps of Sadness where Morla, the Aged One, lives, arrives in the deep chasm of the Dead Mountains, the dwelling place of the horror of horrors Ygramul the Many, in order to finally reach the Southern Oracle, where Uyulala, the voice of silence, reigns in the Palace of Deep Mystery. Uyulala tells him that the only being who can give the Childlike Empress a new name and thus save Fantastica is a child of man from the Outer World.

With the purpose of finding this child, Atreyu tries to get beyond the borders of the kingdom, only to hear from Gmork, the shadow creature of darkness, that fantasy has no borders and that only a human creature can come to Fantastica, not the other way around. Disappointed at the thought of having failed in his quest, Atreyu goes to the Childlike Empress, but she tells him that



he has brought the child of man with him, revealing the true meaning of his journey.<sup>2</sup>

Since the savior of the kingdom holds off his coming, the Golden-eyed Commander of Wishes is forced to look for the Old Man of Wandering Mountain, who chronicles in his book everything that happens in Fantastica. The Old Man re-reads the Neverending Story from the start and narrates himself reading it, then, when he reaches the present again, he starts to narrate himself narrating himself re-reading the story.

The only one who can break this infinite loop is Bastian, who finally enters Fantastica and who is told that he can rebuild the kingdom by the use of his imaginative powers and of the AURYN, which represents the authority of the Childlike Empress. Still, the temptation of “DOING WHAT YOU WISH” that the Golden-eyed Commander lays before the hero’s eyes contains in itself the greatest danger, which is the one of losing oneself. It is Grogaman, the Many-Colored Death, who warns him of the true problem he’s facing:

Bastian had shown the lion the inscription on the reverse side of the Gem. “What do you suppose it means?” he asked. “DO WHAT YOU WISH. That must mean I can do anything I feel like. Don’t you think so?” [...]

“It means that you must do what you really and truly want. And nothing is more difficult.”

“What I really and truly want? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s your own deepest secret and you yourself don’t know it.”

“How can I find out?”

“By going the way of your wishes, from one to another, from first to last. It will take you to what you really and truly want.” [...] “It requires the

greatest honesty and vigilance, because there’s no other journey on which it’s so easy to lose yourself forever.”

“Do you mean because our wishes aren’t always good?” Bastian asked. [...]

“What do you know about wishes? How would you know what’s good and what isn’t?”<sup>3</sup>

The exercise of absolute power changes Bastian and he quickly becomes unrecognizable. First, he makes himself attractive, then strong, then brave, then loved, but with every granted wish he loses a part of himself. His attempts to change the kingdom only lead to the same mixture of beauty and ugliness as before, Fantastica itself being founded on the co-existence of contraries.<sup>4</sup> The “hero” realizes the mistakes he has made when he gets to the City of the Old Emperors, which is full of madmen who tried to produce a better world, and yet they have ended up completely destitute after making the same kind of Fantastica as the one they replaced.

By the end of the novel, Bastian has stopped regarding himself as an arbiter of justice or a divine ruler and he no longer wants to improve the kingdom by force, but he has learned to acknowledge himself and to treasure his personal relationships. After giving up all self-importance, ambition and tyranny, he realizes that the things that really matter to him are the sense of belonging to a community among the Yskalnari, the unconditional affection of Dame Eyola and the ability to love others, like his father or his friends, Atreyu and Falkor. The moral of the work is that what truly shapes the world is the joy of living, of being ourselves, and the love and inspiration we give to the people around us:

But then he jumped into the crystal-clear water. He splashed and spluttered



and let the sparkling rain fall into his mouth. He drank till his thirst was quenched. And joy filled him from head to foot, the joy of living and the joy of being himself. He was newborn. And the best part of it was that he was now the very person he wanted to be. If he had been free to choose, he would have chosen to be no one else. Because now he knew that there were thousands and thousands of forms of joy in the world, but that all were essentially one and the same, namely, the joy of being able to love.

And much later, long after Bastian had returned to his world, in his maturity and even in his old age, this joy never left him entirely. Even in the hardest moments of his life he preserved a lightheartedness that made him smile and that comforted others.”<sup>5</sup>

But what is Fantastica? What does it represent?

In order to find that answer, we need to consider Jung’s theory on imagination and archetypes. According to him, the autonomous activity of the psyche is a continual creating of reality, every psychic process being “an image and an imagining.” Thus, the psychic instincts of the human species appear in the form of images and symbols in dreams or in more complex forms that have known conscious elaboration like religious beliefs, myths or fairytales.

These preexisting psychic forces, of which the subconscious mind consists of, are not predetermined in content but are rather possibilities of representation that can be actualized in different ways. Archetypes become images only when they are activated by a stimulus, being shaped by the individual consciousness or by the group in which they appear.

Structuring the conscious content and influencing motivation and behavior, they

are considered great formative powers that determine the way we perceive the world and act, coming with both power of transformation and destiny. As Jung says, “the secrets of the soul are set in glorious images, which are meant to attract, to convince, to fascinate, and to overpower us.” Thus, the experience of these archetypal expressions develops man’s highest values, guiding him in the search of his soul, of completeness.

When mythical creatures, which constitute the very basis, the *prima materia* of our psychic life, are experienced “in their true form”, they participate in the process of “soul-making”. By giving them “the right name”, by recognizing them for what they are, these figures can enrich our being. In the context of *The Neverending Story*, this idea appears in the words of the Childlike Empress, who stretches the interconnectedness of the two realms of consciousness:

When humans, children of man, come to our world of their own free will, that’s the right way. Every human who has been here has learned something that could be learned only here, and returned to his own world a changed person. Because he had seen you creatures in your true form, he was able to see his own world and his fellow humans with new eyes. Where he had seen only dull, everyday reality, he now discovered wonders and mysteries. That is why humans were glad to come to Fantastica. And the more these visits enriched our world, the fewer lies there were in theirs, the better it became. Just as our two worlds can injure each other, they can also make each other whole again.<sup>6</sup>

As it is implied in the paragraph, the imaginal<sup>7</sup> realm of the psyche possesses the



character of “necessity,” idea which was also stretched by Hillman in his poetic psychology. In an attempt to deepen the Jungian insight into the essential nature of the soul, James Hillman implied that human nature is primarily imaginal, images in their manifest content being fully meaningful. His archetypal psychology considered that images are not in the psyche as in a container but are the psyche, they are what they mean and mean what they are.

A fundamental tenet of this type of psychology was that we cannot imagine without the mythical characters and patterns that inhabit our soul, for they are preconditions of our imagination. If we invent them, then we invent them according to patterns they lay down. This interesting idea also appears in the Neverending story, when Bastian is wandering how much of what he has created is really his creation, and what was already there:

“But does all this exist only after I’ve wished it? Or was it all there before?”

“Both,” said Grogaman.

“How can that be?” Bastian cried almost impatiently. “You’ve been here in Goab, the Desert of Colors, since heaven knows when. The room in your palace was waiting for me since the beginning of time. So, too, was the sword Sikanda. You told me so yourself.”

“That is true, master.”

“But I – I’ve only been in Fantastica since last night! So it can’t be true that all these things have existed only since I came here.”

“Master,” the lion replied calmly. “Didn’t you know that Fantastica is the land of stories? A story can be new and yet tell about olden times. The past comes into existence with the story.”

“Then Perilin, too, must always have

been there,” said the perplexed Bastian. “Beginning at the moment when you gave it its name,” Grogaman replied, “it has existed forever.”<sup>8</sup>

Just as in Hillman’s vision, which has many things in common with Corbin’s mystical perspective, man exists in the midst of psyche and there is much of the soul that extends beyond the nature of a singular human being. The world of the dream is a cosmos in itself, distinct from but not entirely unrelated to the day world. Dream must be met on its own ground, which is that of unfathomable depth and polyvalence.

If the images of the psyche are what they mean, if the figures of myth possess their own consistency, we must simply let dream imagery be, for it is precisely then that it will begin to speak for itself and eventually alter our life. Dreams shape our ways of being into a poetic work, process during which our life itself is transformed into a work of art.

That is precisely why an adequate and meaningful connection between the conscious and the imaginal realm is seen as a correction of the inevitable one-sidedness of the rational mind, which usually concentrates on a few contents to the exclusion of all others. A symbolic compensation is considered necessary to prevent a dissociation of consciousness that facilitates a separation of one part of the mind from the rest, which may lead to a narrowing of mental horizons, to a diminution of personality (“loss of soul”) or to its falsification through the force of the separated part, to a serious impoverishment of human experience and possibly to listlessness and losing of will.

Since the correct use of imaginative powers gives beings and things their reality, making them a part of the real, of the truth of being, denying the importance of imagination or the misuse of it makes everything



unreal, transforming things into lies, alienating them, depriving them of their true purpose and meaning. The concept of “nothing” that appears in *The Neverending Story* refers exactly to this loss of *imaginatio vera*, which keeps man in connection with his true soul. The destruction of Fantastica takes away the hopes and dreams of humanity, depriving man of his freedom, which is replaced by delusions, fears, desires for vain, hurtful things and thoughts of despair.

To summarize, man is primarily an image maker and his psyche is made of images. To live is to imagine things, to be in the soul is to experience the imaginal in all realities and the basic reality of the imaginal. As Hillman says, “we are indeed such stuff as dreams are made of.”

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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “As Bastian read this and listened to the deep, dark voice of the Old Man of Wandering Mountain, a roaring started up in his ears and he saw spots before his eyes.

Why, this was all about him! And it was the Neverending Story. 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.” Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, Garden City, Doubleday & Company, 1983, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> “All your sufferings were necessary. I sent you on the Great Quest – not for the sake of the message you would bring me, but because that was the only way of calling our savior. He took part in everything you did, and he has come all that long way with you. You heard his cry of fear when you were talking with Ygramul beside the Deep Chasm, and you saw him when you stood facing the Magic Mirror Gate. You entered into his image and took it with you, and he followed you, because he saw himself through your eyes. And now, too, he can hear every word we are saying. He knows we are talking about him, he knows we have set our hope in him and are expecting him. Perhaps he even understands that all the hardship you, Atreyu, took upon yourself was for his sake and that all Fantastica is calling him.” *Ibidem*, p. 84-85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p.113.

<sup>4</sup> Even the Childlike Empress “never interfered with anyone ... In her eyes all her



subjects were equal ... every creature, whether good or bad, beautiful or ugly, merry or solemn, foolish or wise – all owed their existence to her existence.”*Idem*, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Corbin defines the *imaginal* as the mediating ground where the literal is dissolved and the spiritual imaginalized.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.