“True peace of mind” allegorical narrative as a tool of moral (trans)formation in J. A. Comenius’s *Labyrinth*

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Abstract

Labyrinth of the world and paradise of the heart belongs to the jewels of Czech literature. The author – Jan Amos Comenius – consciously uses allegorical narrative for didactic purposes – mainly for his own moral self-reflection in the face of suffering. His method proved to be very effective. The goal of this text is to explore the potential of the literary method from the perspective of moral (trans)formation. The key question is: How did Comenius convey the moral content of his “lesson” in the *Labyrinth*? Or in general: How does allegorical narrative work as a tool of moral (trans)formation – both for the reader and author of the text. Specifically, this paper attempts to show several literary functions of the *Labyrinth* as a tool of moral (trans)formation: the therapeutic function, the emphatic function, the imitation function, the organizational function, the performative function and the plot function.

Keywords: Comenius, *Labyrinth*, morality, (trans)formation, self-understanding, learning.

Introduction: Comenius, *Labyrinth* and education

In 1678 John Bunyan’s famous *Pilgrim’s Progress* was first published. It is an allegory about a pilgrim who wanders through the world trying to escape its vanity; after many adventures he eventually reaches the “Celestial City”, that is salvation. About half a century before *Pilgrim’s Progress* (in 1631) Jan Amos Comenius’ *Labyrinth of the world and paradise of the heart* was published. It is an allegory about a pilgrim who wanders through the world trying to escape its vanity and seeking the “true peace of mind” in human life; he eventually finds it in the Paradise of the heart. Interestingly, almost everybody in the English-speaking world knows Bunyan’s book, but almost nobody knows Comenius’ book. The reasons are obvious; first, it is the language in which both works were written. Secondly, the unfortunate circumstances of the Counter-reformation in 17th Century Bohemia doomed Comenius’ literature to oblivion. This article, therefore, may serve the English reader as a short introduction to comparative study of late the Renaissance genre of didactic allegory.

Allegory is usually considered to be a literary tool, not a didactic one, and yet one of the greatest pieces of Czech allegorical literature serves primarily the didactic purpose. That is how most Comenius scholars interpret the *Labyrinth*. Comenius himself already discloses the didactic intention of his writing in the introductory chapter, called “To the Reader”, where he says the work would be nothing less than a search for the “true peace of mind” in human life. He admits that it’s not an easy task, but it isn’t impossible. He believes that in the same way Solomon himself looked for “highest good” (*summum bonum*)” but couldn’t find it anywhere until his eyes were opened to “catch a glimpse of the multifaceted futility and miserable illusion that is hidden everywhere under an outer glow and glory that at first glance is so attractive—and then he learned that peace and safety of the mind is to be found elsewhere”.²

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² Citations from the *Labyrinth* are my own translations from the Amsterdam edition of 1663, which was released under the review of Antonín Škarka in 1974. To compare the English text, see James Naughton’s translation of the *Labyrinth* available online <<http://www.labyrinth.cz/en/>> [Retrieved February 14, 2015].

Let me highlight the word “learn”. When facing the White Mountain Battle consequences Comenius “learnt” something important.³ He says that the book was written so that he could “more clearly present” his experience, “both to himself and to others”. This didactic objective could have been achieved using the traditional treatise form, as was the custom in Comenius’ time, which was to describe the problem, analyze it and respond with the appropriate argument. Comenius himself also employed that method in many of his other works from that time and later—for example, *Hlubina bezpečnosti* [*The Depths of Safety*], *Pres boží* [*God’s Press*], and his thorough analysis of “human affairs” in the introductory chapters of the *Velká i Česká didaktika* [*Great Didactics and Czech Didactics*] and “public affairs” in *Obecná porada* [*General Consultation*]. In *The Labyrinth*, however, he chooses a different method. Instead of a theoretical essay he displays narrative scenery, creates a plot, lets allegorical figures do the talking and raises questions like: “Did you ever hear about the Cretan Labyrinth?” Didactically, psychologically and aesthetically the effect is powerful. Let us explore and analyze the method.

Stories have special power. It is said that truth clothed in story can enter any door. This is made evident in the fame of *The Labyrinth*. Comenius wrote many quality works, but none reached the level of recognition and popularity which *The Labyrinth* reached in both the lay and professional communities. This is attested to not only by the number of reprints but also by the unprecedented abundance of references to it in literature: “one of the best books in all of Czech literature” (Bílý, 1939, p. 9), “[a][D]iscerning view of the world, massive and fascinating flight of imagination [...] deep and honest emotion” (Bílý, 1939, p. 9). Similarly, in Antonín Škarka’s judgment the *Labyrinth* “surpasses every other work of our older literature” (Škarka, 1974, p. 9). Jan Patočka even says that the *Labyrinth* is a work which has no “precedent in Czech literature” (Patočka, 2003, p. 400).

It’s evident, then, that in the *Labyrinth* Comenius succeeded in, on the one hand doing justice to a theme which spoke and still speaks (not only) to the Czech soul, and on the other hand choosing a very effective format. I believe it is precisely in this that its “magic” lies. In contrast to Comenius’ other works the *Labyrinth* is a story, and a didactic one, which is important for the theme of this paper. The term “didactic” isn’t used here in the modern sense of the word, that is, as a theory that pertains to the systematic aspects of teaching, but in the wider sense, in the same way Comenius uses the word in his later *Didactics*. It rather indicates a philosophical approach to education, or to the educative purpose, which is carried throughout the work.

Comenius already discloses both his didactic and moral intention in the introductory chapter, called “To the Reader,” where he reveals the work would be nothing less than a search for the “highest good” (*summum bonum*) in human life. In this he reveals the breadth of his educational aim. He intends to lead the reader into the area of practical philosophy, that is, ethics—which Josef Jungmann pointed out in his *History of Czech Literature* where he ranks the *Labyrinth* among the “moral writings” (Nový, 1983, p. 95). But it will also be an epistemological quest, for the author will seek the “true” good and the “real” truth against all depravity and deceit. Comenius further informs the reader that when he was thinking about how to “more clearly present” these things, both to himself and to others, the idea of “story” occurred to him. The contents of the story is revealed in the subtitle—using his well-known dualist style Comenius states that first we will see the “vagueness and confusion, whirling and grinding, illusion and deceit, poverty and want...” of the world, and then the “true and full intellect, satisfaction and joy” to which it’s possible to attain in one’s own heart.

³ The battle of White Mountain, on November 8, 1620, occurred about 13 km (8 miles) west of Prague. The death and destruction was shocking. Many people from Comenius’ circles began to flee as refugees. It was a sad turning point in regional history.

Good educators and teachers intuitively know the power of story and have used it literally from time immemorial. In pedagogical terminology: they communicate their curriculum in a narrative form. Remember, for example, the stories of Moses, Homer, Plato and Jesus, whose “teachings” still have a significant cultural influence today. Joseph H. Miller noted that we don’t know of “any human society [...], that hasn’t had its stories and narrative customs, its myths, [...] tribal legends and stories about its heroes” (Miller, 2008, p. 30). Nor has the commencement of the rationalistic paradigm of modernity managed to eliminate narrative poetics from educational areas (even though it has almost happened in the university sector of the school system).⁴ This raises the key question, what is the “magic” of the narrative form? Where is its formative strength? What gives the story (in our case, allegorical) such didactic functionality?

Narrative as a tool in moral education

The telling of a story is a form of self-understanding. *The Labyrinth* is no exception. From the outset of his story Comenius warns us that it will be an almost therapeutic experience. Comenius himself describes the therapeutic content of his writing in a letter to the Dutch publisher Petr Montanus:

When the darkness of calamity deepened in 1623 and it appeared that there was no hope of human help or advice, tossed about by anxieties and temptations without end, I called in the deep of the night to God with unusual fervor; I jumped out of bed, grabbed my Bible and prayed [...] I opened randomly to the book of Isaiah, reading on and on with grief, and the moment I felt that my distress was dispelled I grabbed my pen and started to write—whether for my own future benefit if that terror should return again, or for others (Nováková, 1990, p. 157).

In *The Labyrinth* then we are not reading some figment of the author’s imagination (a “poem”), but a real episode that he experienced himself in “the few years of his life.” And (I remind the reader again), the reason for his narrative is to get everything “more clearly in front of his eyes,” in order to clarify things so he could better understand the world, the things that happened to him, and himself. Humans are beings who need to understand. One is, as Martin Heidegger put it—a being stricken with care about the meaning of his existence. Or in still other words—he is “a being that cares about his own existence” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 220).

Questions of meaning, however, never appear in a vacuum. They take place within the background of the specific cultural tradition into which the questioner was born and in which he/she was raised—and a fundamental part of every culture is again, story. It is a large and important meta-story, around which the community is united, and which is shared, guarded and bequeathed to the next generation. Milan Machovec notes that humanity always, one way or another, retains a vital relationship to something that is above the individual, which goes beyond it (Machovec, 1998, p. 10ff). This constitutes one of the fundamental needs of a human being—the need for transcendence. In narrative terminology, it’s a meaningful plot to one’s life that goes beyond the horizon of the individual. Great stories (with a wide repertoire of sub-stories) have always been the intermediary for meeting this need. Narrative serves as a means of moral and cultural identification. All of the elements, structures, concepts, values, and institutions (including pedagogy) find their legitimacy precisely in their relationship to these universally shared meta-narratives (more on this later). In ancient cultures it was usual to codify exemplary models of human behavior in myths. In later traditions we find pictures of reality in narrative

⁴ I am writing from my own teaching experience. University classes are almost exclusively “lectures.” Likewise, written addresses are exclusively scientific, never narrative.

form, providing people with the basic reference points, incentives and moral appeals for forming one's self-image (Hošek, 2010, p. 88).

Why stories? The story is the only kind of discourse which, in the way it selectively presents, arranges, develops, and connects individual events, gives them special importance and makes sense of them. Stories, with their structure and wholeness, most resemble real life. Unlike scientific protocol, factual records, and other exacting genres, a story is set in a specific situation and time, it is organized, it has the twists and turns and dynamics of a plot, a denouement—and most of all, a beginning and an end. In this context Jiří Trávníček notes that, in addition to the possibility of identifying with the hero, a story also offers the possibility of an even deeper identification “with the story itself and its time, which in the story has a beginning and end that are not only the two endpoints but in particular function as its completion” (Trávníček, 2007, p. 52).

All in all a story mirrors real life, and thus also even the life of the reader who can recognize himself in the story. This feature of story is, in terms of shaping the moral identity of the individual, irreplaceable. A story that is about me, in which I can see myself, interests me. I'm willing to listen to a story where I can play the central role. A story in which others listen to me through their imagination, calls forth that kind of empathy which is so desirable for gaining the reader's attention. In the story the characters through which we confront our own existence live, act, think, and are manifested with all their qualities and abilities. We compare and try to make sense of our lives. Thus engaged, the reader is prepared to allow his or her own life perspective to be changed by the perspective of the story, a key element in the process of moral self-understanding.

In addition to this empathetic function stories provide their readers with even more possibilities. Consider, for example, moral imitation. Stories contain models of behavior which present a real option to imitate. “Stories give us the option of entering within ourselves and seeing ourselves objectively” (Trávníček, 2007, p. 52). The reader is thus invited to examine the many modes of his/her own moral actions. Through the configuration of the quantity of variables in an individual narrative a story can become to the reader a vision or revelation which serves as an incentive to imitate and eventually reconfigure or re-tell his or her own story. Some authors even speak of the heuristic potential of story (Hošek, 2010, p. 89).

This is closely related to another function of stories—organizing. It is a very important yet not morally “innocent” function of every narrative, as Joseph H. Miller says (Miller, 2008, p. 34). The events in any story are usually not told as they actually happened. The narrative's organization of the events serves to “confirm or reinforce, or even to create the most basic cultural assumptions about human existence, time, fate, one's own being, where we come from, what we are here on this earth to do and where we are going—about the whole story of human life” (Miller, 2008, p. 34).

If someone asks me who I am, there arises in my mind a whole assortment of memories, moral values, passions, aspirations, beliefs, psychological states, and other particulars which have undergone significant changes over time. And because I don't have, in the words of David Novitz (2009), a “wide-screen” perspective of myself, it is very difficult to answer the question. A narrative, however, provides a unique organizational potential. If I am to understand who I really am, I have to organize the facts I know about myself into a meaningful storyline. “We understand events in terms of the events we already understand” (Schank, 2000, p. 15). A story organizes the unstructured material of life experience into understandable moral frameworks, components, and patterns, or it functions as an organizing grid of fragmented experiences in the same way grammar coordinates meaning. According to the narrative structures we can reorganize, and often even transform, our life experiences to make sense; to find what we consider to be their true meaning. We emphasize some, criticize others, and at the same time put it all together into a meaningful whole. The way we tell the stories of our lives uniquely

affects ourselves because there is a close connection between the way we view ourselves and how we will probably act.

There is another feature of the story, which we can call performative. The question is, how is the story that I read or tell related to reality? Does the story shape reality, or only reveal it? I believe that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The uncovering of reality is based on the assumption that reality (the world) has a pre-existing order which the story (or art in general), in one way or another, follows, imitates, or represents. On the other hand the forming of reality presupposes that reality is open to further organization or even a further creating—that there exists a kind of “pre-arranged harmony”⁵ between reality and human imagination which enables the human mind to create. And the purpose of this creation is, to stress the point, understanding; as Katarína Mišíková notes, “art transforms reality to reveal its inner meaning” (Mišíková, 2009, p. 153). From the psychological perspective it is “performative”—as the theorists of speech acts say.⁶ In this sense a story is a way of changing or influencing reality through words. It makes something happen in the real world (Koten, 2013). Or in the words of Ingo Balderman, “the way a narrative presents the world determines its quality” (Balderman, 2004, p. 88).

Rami Shapiro expresses it concisely: “Attentive listening [...] to stories pulls us out of our own story and reveals an alternative drama that can offer us a greater understanding than any story we ourselves can tell. [...] And that is what makes great stories: they show us a different understanding of reality. Nothing has changed but our minds, and that of course changes everything” (Shapiro, 2003, p. 16–18).

Labyrinth’s plot in context of moral (trans)formation

Aristotle noted in his *Poetics* that one of the most important aspects of a good story is the plot. In his terminology *mythos*, which is translated variously—outline, structure of events, plot, *syžet* (Rus.)—together with *fabule*, create the core of every story.⁷ The beginning, development and climax are normal parts of every story. In other words, in order to be a “well-told” story it must contain: 1. an initial situation—Joseph K. awakes in his bed, Neo is awakened by his computer, a person is created by God, a pilgrim finds himself in a labyrinth; 2. some fundamental change (complication, twist, conflict)—Joseph K. is absurdly accused, Neo swallows the pill of truth, the created one revolts against his Creator, the pilgrim gets glasses of deception; 3. its resolution—Joseph K. insists on a fair trial, Neo wakes up in the “true” reality, the created one is saved, the pilgrim finds the paradise of the heart. Everything else, such as linguistic devices, timeframes, locations, characters etc., are, according to Aristotle, secondary and supplementary. The quality of *mythos* is crucial.

Comenius’ plot is, in this regard, impressively straightforward. As an early Renaissance text, *The Labyrinth* doesn’t have complex plot strategies, but follows a well-established framework: beginning, middle, end—entry, plot, climax. The reader is simply put into the situation:

Having reached the age when human intelligence begins to distinguish between good and evil [...] it seemed to me highly desirable to consider well which of these groups of folks I should join, and which profession I should choose for my life work. [...] Thereupon I set out by myself and began to consider where and how I should begin (chapter 1, 2).

⁵ This is a concept of C. S. Lewis (Lewis, 1969, p. 169).

⁶ See the classic works of Austin (*How to do things with words*, 2000), Searle (*Speech Acts*, 1969), and Alston (*Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*, 2000).

⁷ W. Schmid clarifies the terminology with his reference to B. Tomaševský, “the plot is what actually happened, the storyline is what tells the reader about it” (Schmid, 2004, p. 13).

Then comes the central plot, brought about by the fact, which the reader understands, that the allegorical guides of the hero/pilgrim are trying for the whole journey to deceive (and control) him, but “luckily” (his own word) he gets a secret chance to escape their snares. The “glasses of deception” that they forced him to wear did not fit him properly, so when the pilgrim “raised his head and lowered his eyes” (leaned back his head and looked out of the corner of his eye), he was able to see things “purely naturally,” that is, such as they truly are. The plot is then more or less rhythmically lengthened as the pilgrim goes through the town and has a look at his “labyrinth-world” in each of its spheres, until the denouement when he finds the way out, or rather, he is found and taken out, of the labyrinth. The resolution has its own rhythm and length because it is more or less a mirror image of all that went before.

Clearly this is not a very sophisticated storyline or suspenseful plot. Comenius doesn’t use all the opportunities the epic genre offers, or at least those which we know today are offered by this genre. The individual episodes are somewhat repetitive and follow a predictable framework. The pilgrim comes to one of the streets in the labyrinth, sees it the way his guides want, through the glasses of deception, and then again with his own eyes as it really is, and in the end leaves in disappointment to look further. It goes on like this throughout the first part, until he finds paradise. Moreover, the way the storyline led Comenius to the second part was turned into an almost monotonous monologue, only occasionally punctuated by entrances of the Savior—which greatly diminishes the epic nature and drama of the story, making it instead more like a descriptive-explanatory treatise.

Nevertheless, *The Labyrinth* still has basic plot contours, which enables the text to convey the intended moral content. The reader can participate in the structure of the narrative. From the psychological perspective it isn’t important whether the climax will be a surprise to the reader, but that he/she will participate in the storyline. Jiří Trávníček notes that this is one of the elementary ways in which a person (first in childhood) acquires stories. Before curiosity, the perception of causality, time, and other phenomenon of narratives can enter the game. “Participation in the structure” is crucial for the reader (and more originally the listener), as every parent who tells their child fairytales from their earliest childhood knows. Although they have heard the story (fairytale) many times, they want to hear it again and again, without any changes and exactly as it was before. But even adults tend to enjoy this. They return to their favorite book or film that they have already read or seen many times. The pleasure from joining in the storyline and final resolution is worth it. The Magnificent Seven finally disperse, Sherlock convicts the murderer, Harry overcomes Voldemort, the pilgrim finds the paradise of the heart. They are all variations of the same structure. It seems that Vladimir Propp, a classic writer of Russian formalism, had it right. In his particularly influential work *The Morphology of Fairytales* he demonstrates that the structure of the outline of this type of narrative is transferable from one story to another, even though the individual scenes in the stories might be different. Propp (1968) shows that Russian fairytales are all variations of the same structural form. Thus the reader’s motivation isn’t necessarily knowledge, the point isn’t to know how it will turn out—the reader already knows that—but to a far greater degree he/she yearns to be part of the story, to participate in it and to “be there.” So it becomes a kind of ritual, an almost sacred moment, when the reader (or listener), the storyteller, and the text “harmonize according to established rules” (Trávníček, 2007, pp. 13–14).

It is precisely this “storyness” that raises Comenius’ *Labyrinth* above the other moral literature of his time, which were mostly treatises, and, states Miller (2008, p. 30), brings about something “natural and universal,” which is typical of all stories—the plot “draws in” the reader. In educational terminology: it motivates, activates or engages. And therein lies the magic of moral transformation.

Conclusion

I have sketched a few functions of a narrative relevant to moral education discourse that came out of my reading of Comenius' work *The Labyrinth of the world and the paradise of the heart*—some literary strategies that have the power to so captivate the reader that he or she is morally drawn in, engaged, and motivated. It is clear that the uniqueness of *The Labyrinth* is not in its originality. In terms of genre, literary devices, and the central motif (a pilgrim's journey and search for the true and highest good), it is in keeping with the literary trends of his time. Suffice to say, it recalls the utopian allegories of Johan Valentin Andreae, Tommaso Campanella, Thomas More and, in the English speaking world, the famous *Pilgrim's progress* (Bunyan, 2016).⁸

However, whenever Comenius took the idea from an older or contemporary work he used his own creativity to transform it. There emerged a very simple story, historically contingent, perhaps too allegorical, too didactic, or too moralizing, but still a story that has its own importance and magic. I believe with this analysis I have only just begun the research into story. I'm sure that each future step along the narrative path will reveal new dimensions of its magic and give glimpses of new realities. The many dismantled layers of the story are preparatory to breaking down others for didactic purposes. If we ask what makes a good story effective in relation to shaping one's moral character, it isn't enough to analyze the stated storyline, composition, perspective, etc. We know that their effect is based on their interconnectivity, compactness, and harmony. The fine web of a good narrative into which the reader is "caught" is the result of the polyphonic harmony of all its parts. The "organic unity" of the narrative (Kubíček, 2007, p. 29), is thus difficult to understand and analyze, but that is precisely where its magic lies. When viewed from the didactic perspective, the morally activating power of the story does not lie only in the quality of its component layers, but is primarily in the quality of its interconnectivity as a harmonious whole. The specificity of the narrative genre thus corresponds to the specific nature of humanity. So just as a person isn't only a rational being but also moral, emotional, social, physical, etc., neither does a story work in isolation, only in the mind, or only in the emotions, etc. A person exposed to the power of story is a being who goes through a holistic experience in which he or she thinks, feels, believes, endures, identifies with, receives information, evaluates and – most importantly – makes moral judgements and decisions. A good story is a unique form of human art which can impact on a person in his/her entirety and change him/her – make him/her (morally) better. Not every form of narrative succeeds in this, but it works in *The Labyrinth*.

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⁸ From the literary-historical perspective it is an interesting fact that one copy of Andreae's work *Peregrini in patria errors*, stored in the Nuremberg Museum, is mistakenly attributed to Comenius (Novák, 1895).

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