

Michael G. Lilienthal
Literary Criticism
Prof. Johnson
Analysis Paper
11 December 2009

The Inadequacy of Language in *A Wrinkle in Time*

When I first read Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, I was a middle-school student already in love with science fiction. It was around this time also that I read *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, *The Animorphs* series by K. A. Applegate, *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, and others. I had not yet learned to analyze my books very deeply beyond regarding them as great adventure stories. Thus, my first reading of *A Wrinkle in Time* was merely the reading of an exciting adventure story.

I perhaps read the novel as one might read sentimental literature. I connected with the protagonist, Meg Murry and was hooked onto the idea of others being unjust and cruel to her. I tried to see in myself all the qualities that were good in Meg, and although, as I stated, my analytical abilities were somewhat limited on this first reading, I recognized the theme of individuality and started to discover my own identity and voice. In fact, it was this novel that was one of the first inspirations I had to become a writer. It also excited my imagination with the scientific themes, such as the concept of the "tesseract" (18). The tesseract, it is explained, is the "fifth dimension," a way of moving more quickly through space and time than one could in a straight line – what the strange, supernatural characters of Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which call a type of "shortcut" (69). It is from this concept that the book takes its title: a tesseract is compared to a wrinkle, in the sense that if a string is taken to be the distance between points A and B, then instead of moving all the way across, one can simply *wrinkle* the string, bringing points A and B together. The idea was intriguing and excited my imagination.

2 Lilienthal

I have read the novel numerous times, and each time grown to appreciate it and enjoy it even more. I caught on to the religious themes, the scientific ideas, and more, but it was on this last reading that I really began to analyze it.

I mentioned the theme of individuality (or isolation) earlier, and it is true that it is an extremely powerful one in this book. We see at the very start of the novel that the protagonist is isolated in her “attic bedroom,” in a house that was “isolated on a back country road,” which is so far away from everyone else that nobody would “hear if [Meg] screamed and screamed and screamed,” and as Meg imagines, “Nobody’d care, anyhow” (L’Engle 1; 4; 5). This idea Meg has demonstrates a further type of isolation. Meg’s entire family is noted to be “different”: Her parents are “brilliant,” while Meg is a “poor student,” and her baby brother, Charles Wallace, developed at an odd pace, not speaking until he was four years old, and once he did begin to speak, it was “suddenly...using entire sentences” (1; 7).

However, the isolation is not meant to be read in a sentimental way, as I first read it. Meg herself, though she defends her family, often with violence, does not believe the isolation to which she is victim to be merely the fault of “normal” people. In her thoughts at the very beginning of the book she complains that she herself is “doing everything wrong” (1). Even in feeling isolated from her own family she wishes she could be more like them. Ultimately, she blames herself for her isolation, because she herself “asked to have the attic bedroom” (3).

Despite Meg’s desire to be normal, however, or at least to associate herself with normal people, the remainder of the novel sweeps her into a supernatural adventure, guided by the three beings Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which. Upon first meeting Mrs. Whatsit, Meg and the reader both realize that something is different about her: first we see her dressed ridiculously in bundles of various sorts of clothing, and then the way she speaks is something different from the

norm. When asked how she knew whose house it was she had come to, she replies simply, “By the smell” (14). When she leaves then, after having stopped only a short while, she parts with an enigmatic phrase directed at Meg’s mother: “[T]here *is* such a thing as a tesseract.” Meg’s mother pales at the sentence, and wonders, “How could she have known?” (18).

Mrs. Whatsit and her friends further demonstrate the strangeness of their natures as they sweep Meg and her company through their adventures. Meg gets to experience the tesseract firsthand, and if one reads closely, he may notice that not only are wrinkles made between points in space and in time, but also in other media: between Meg and other people (specifically Calvin, a boy considered “normal”), between Meg’s family and her father (who at the beginning of the novel has been separated from his family for years), between Meg and the supernatural world that her younger brother has already accepted, and between Meg and herself (wherein she does finally learn self-appreciation). A great deal of what creates these “wrinkles” is understanding. Meg’s potential for taking these shortcuts is foreshadowed when she is trying to tutor the older boy Calvin in math. As he continually points out, she is “supposed to be dumb in school,” but she is nevertheless able to show a much greater understanding of mathematics than he, thanks to the “shortcuts” she learned from her father (38). Her problem in school, she and her mother both demonstrate, is that she has “to do it *their* way,” and Meg “gets sullen and stubborn.” In other words, there is a lack of understanding between Meg and others.

Further difficulties in understanding demonstrate themselves, as Mesdames Whatsit, Who, and Which attempt to communicate with the human children, which they continually say is “not easy when [what they mean] is about things for which [human] civilization still has no words” (69). There are a number of things that they state “won’t go into your words” (60). Mrs. Whatsit is the most talkative of the three women, which she explains is because of her youth,

which allows her greater abilities in “verbalizing and materializing so well” (77-78). Mrs. Who, almost every time she speaks, quotes some historical text, which Mrs. Whatsit explains: “she finds it so difficult to verbalize....It helps her if she can quote instead of working out words of her own” (54). Mrs. Which speaks in an extremely strange way, drawling sounds out in odd ways, making her sound perpetually tired, and indeed, she never “matterialize[s] completely [because she] ffindd[s] itt verry ttirinngg” (49). The only reason the three use words at all is for the sake of the understanding of the children, who cannot understand any other way of communication, except perhaps Charles Wallace, who is used once or twice as a translator for otherworldly things (60-61).

The ideas here reflect many of the sentiments expressed in Plato’s *Republic*, especially in the Allegory of the Cave. Men see shadows on the wall and imagine that these things are real. A man is shown what is truly real, and then is taken back to the land of these shadows and finds it difficult, nigh impossible to communicate with the men there because their minds are limited by only what they know, and thus there is a separation due to a lack of understanding (Republic 64-66). The man’s fate, like Meg’s and Charles Wallace’s, is that “he make[s] a fool of himself [and others] say that he’d come back from his upward journey with his eyes ruined” (Republic 66). Plato concludes that the human realm is confusing to the eyes of a man from the divine realm, and he should be pitied. This leads to his decision to ban poetry from his republic, because it “deforms its audience’s minds” (67). Men, unable to distinguish reality while they observe this poetry, which is only the representation of an appearance, can take nothing from it, and are instead hampered by it. Plato provides a sort of loophole, however, in that he says that “poetry deforms its audience’s minds, *unless* they have the antidote, which is *recognition* of what this kind of poetry is actually like” (67; italics mine). This sentiment can be linked to some of

the ideas of Stéphane Mallarmé, specifically that “[l]anguages...are imperfect in so far as they are many [because they] lack the supreme language” (847). Mallarmé says of speech what Plato is saying of representative poetry, that it “has no connection with the reality of things except in matters commercial” (Mallarmé 849). Essentially Mallarmé’s argument is that language is imperfect because man, unlike God, cannot create a thing by speaking it.

This imperfection is undoubtedly present in the language utilized in *A Wrinkle in Time*. In numerous situations it demonstrates itself tedious, slow, and inadequate. There seems to be no good reason to speak language when it is so unreal, except that the humans are unable to speak in any other way. It is not only Mrs. Which and company that find verbalizing difficult. A race of aliens that Meg and the others meet at one point prefer not to use spoken language, as one of them requests of Meg: “try not to say any words for just a moment. Think within your own mind” (L’Engle 173). This race, in fact, finds more than one human concept difficult, e.g. “light.” They have no eyes, and therefore cannot understand anything that has to do with seeing. As one of the aliens says, “We do not know what things *look* like, as you say.... We know what things *are* like. It must be a very limiting thing, this seeing” (170). Meg tries to explain sight to the alien, and eventually comes to the idea of artificial lights, which are even more confusing to it, being unable to understand the need for artificial lights. In this conversation the alien seems like the man who comes to the cave from above, and Meg one of the men trapped therein. Meg is trying to explain the shadows on the wall, and the alien cannot understand its significance.

There is another character who does not communicate through spoken language. He is called in the novel only “the man with red eyes” (106). He speaks to the children through what seems to be a sort of telepathy, putting words “directly into their brains” (111). The interesting thing here is that he is an evil character, a servant of the evil being called IT.

Something must be said of this character IT for context's sake. IT lives on the planet Camazotz, which is a planet that seems to have been born out of 1984 or worse in the sense that everyone is exactly alike, and "individuals have been done away with" (132). It is even to the point that everyone is synchronous, functioning in tandem, perfectly on the same beat as everyone else.

The man with the red eyes tries to assimilate the children into the society of Camazotz by essentially brainwashing them. One of the things he says to them is that "you don't need to vocalize verbally with me, you know. I can understand you quite as well as you can understand me" (115). With this statement he tries to emphasize how much better his way of life is than theirs and that they would benefit by adopting his ways. Charles Wallace responds, however, with a statement that seems to contradict everything we have noticed about the theme of language's inadequacy to this point: "The spoken word is one of the *triumphs* of man" (115; italics mine). The spoken word has countless times up to this point demonstrated itself inadequate, and after this point will do so even more. It seems, rather than being a triumph, to be a fault.

Before the children encounter any of the citizens of Camazotz, the Mesdames endow them with gifts that are meant to help them in their fight against IT. What Mrs. Whatsit gives to Meg are the "faults" she already has, to which Meg responds, "But I'm always trying to get rid of my faults!" (93). However, her faults do indeed seem to help her in this situation, which is part of what helps Meg towards what might be called her self-actualization. The faults Meg turns to are "[a]nger, impatience, stubbornness," which help her to resist the hypnotizing effect of IT in trying to absorb her into ITself. This is a direct parallel to the way spoken language

helps Charles Wallace and the others resist the man with red eyes. The essence of these faults is that they allow those who have them to be individual.

Charles Wallace is captured by IT through the course of the story. In one of her confrontations with him, Meg experiences “a moment of blazing truth” and realizes that “*Like* and *equal* are not the same thing at all” (150). This would appear to be the moment wherein she has achieved her happy medium, except that as the novel continues, she demonstrates that she has not yet applied the concept to herself. It is a significant step, however, for as she realizes this truth in the context of Camazotz, it validates her own individuality and keeps her from being absorbed. However, the idea is not solidified until later.

Charles Wallace is under the control of IT. IT speaks through him, uses him as a tool. IT uses the man with red eyes much the same way. The concept of people being spoken through is something that turns them into a sort of medium, but in a different sense from the happy one Meg needs to find. The people become a sort of text of which IT is the author. This recalls Socrates’ use of the myth of Theuth in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Theuth created a medium of expression that he believed would solve the problem of forgetfulness. In short it would be a more perfect medium. However, the king of the gods, Thamus, points out that Theuth “give[s] his] disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth.” IT is providing a way of existence that IT claims is “peace and utter rest...freedom from all responsibility” (L’Engle 121). It only *appears* to be perfect, however. Part of Plato’s concern about written word is that it leaves no room for conversation, because those who receive it “know not to whom they should reply, to whom not” (“Phaedrus”). Theuth is called “the father of letters [written word].” IT, in that sense, is the “father” of IT’s media, the man with red eyes and Charles Wallace. The issue here is that Charles Wallace’s real father is also there. Here is a solidified example of the issue of “to

whom [to] reply” as Plato was concerned. Charles Wallace, though it is not said specifically that he was brainwashed, and it is even said that “hypnotized” is “too primitive a word,” has somehow become confused about which father is the true one (L’Engle 127). IT commands obedience, like a real father would, and Charles Wallace’s real father even does try to command that obedience from him: “I’m your father Charles. Look at me” (L’Engle 143). Meg has the conflict, too, of which of the two to obey, but in the end she reacts “obediently” to her real father (151).

Here is where Meg’s real happy medium comes into play. Meg had been dealing with absolutes, believing that individuality and conformity were mutually exclusive. On Earth she experienced individuality without conformity. On Camazotz she caught a glimpse of what conformity without individuality looked like. Mrs. Whatsit, however, finally sets her straight with a metaphor that demonstrated that the best way was to have complete freedom *within* conformity. The example she uses could not be better: she uses a type of poem, a sonnet. She says that the sonnet “is a very strict form of poetry, [b]ut within this strict form the poet has complete freedom to say whatever he wants” (186). This happy medium serves as a response to Plato’s seemingly heartless condemnation and banishment of all poetry: that if one *understands* the truth, poetry can serve a purpose within the rules of that truth.

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, L’Engle does not dispute the inadequacy of language. She does not try to argue against the fact that “the things which are seen are temporal, [b]ut the things which are not seen are eternal” (175). She does not glorify the human race in their accomplishments and abilities. She rather considers men beings within eternity, beings who must conform to the truth, but within that eternal truth, beings who have complete freedom, with their language and otherwise.

Works Cited

L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1962.

Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Crisis in Poetry." Trans. Rosemary Lloyd. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 845-851.

Plato. "Phaedrus." Trans. Benjamin Jowett. *The Internet Classics Archive*. 14 Sept. 2009
<<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>>.

---. "Republic." Trans. Robin Waterfield. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 49-80.