

Pierre Berton and The Romantic Tradition

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Pierre Berton's *The Secret World of Og* has been reissued in a large, extensively illustrated paperback edition. Because the work first appeared sixteen years ago and is well-known, it seems unnecessary for me to review it in the usual sense. Instead, I will try to define the particular character of Berton's rather remarkable book. This, it seems to me, can best be done by placing it in the context of what I would like to call the Romantic Tradition in English language children's literature.

What I refer to as the Romantic Tradition is a living tradition. Its central works are continuously in print and figure prominently in the children's sections of bookstores. There was, of course, a flourishing children's book industry in England in the eighteenth century prior to the Romantic Movement, but its products are now known only to the specialist. The first landmarks of the Romantic Tradition appeared in the 1860's and 70's. These were the Alice books of Lewis Carroll and the Princess books of George MacDonald. At the turn of the century, the tradition was continued by E. Nesbit in England and in North America by the Anne of Green Gables books of L.M. Montgomery. In the 1930's, the tradition was graced by the glorious Swallows and Amazons adventures of Arthur Ransome and by Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, while the 1950's saw the appearance of C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. In the 1960's, the tradition entered a late phase with imitators of Lewis and Tolkien such as the Englishman Alan Garner with his *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and the American Ursula Le Guin and her Earthsea trilogy.

The Romantic Tradition grows out of the conception of the child that finds its most famous expression in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood", which pictures the child as the "best Philosopher" who comes into this world "trailing clouds of glory," which describes the "growing Boy" as one upon whom the "Shades of the prison-house begin to close," and which presents the "Man" as he who sees the child's vision "fade into the light of common day". By the mid-nineteenth century, this concept of the child as the possessor of an imaginative and spiritual capacity lost when the individual was indoctrinated into the materialistic and empirical attitudes of the adult world was widespread. Encouraged by translations of works by H.C. Anderson, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and the Grimm Brothers, and given imaginative substance in Dicken's Little Nell and Paul Dombey, it shaped the sorts of child characters who inhabit the children's books of the Romantic Tradition. MacDonald's Irene is one of the five people in any century who find their way into the Grandmother's tower, and she maintains her belief in the Grandmother in the

face of adult scepticism; Ransome's children construct play-worlds from which the "natives" (i.e. grown-ups) are excluded; Anne of Green Gables is passionately concerned about "scope for the imagination" and is known to "fall into day-dreams in the middle of a task and forget all about it until such time as she was sharply recalled to earth by a reprimand or a catastrophe." Child characters of this sort were simply unheard of in the far more sober and practical children's books of the eighteenth century. These romantic books are about the imaginative lives of their child characters and, more generally, about the imagination and its interaction with reality and about the relation between the psychology of the child and that of the adult.

The books of the Romantic Tradition not only present a certain kind of child character; they also, either implicitly or explicitly, contain a concept of an adult who has not, like the "Man" of Wordsworth's Ode, lost the gifts of the child. This concept was also wide-spread in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1863, in the Preface to her collection, *The Fairy Book: The Best Popular Fairy Stories*, Dinah Mulock wrote, "This is meant to be the best collection attainable of that delight of all children, and of many grown people who retain the child heart still". We find Charles Dickens saying much the same thing when he speaks of "the fairy literature of our childhood" in his periodical, *Household Words*: "it has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds where we may walk with children, sharing their delights." What we have here is a concept of a state akin to Blake's Higher Innocence in which the values of innocence and experience are combined. This concept receives its classic expression in George MacDonald's *The Princess and Curdie*: "the boy should enclose and keep, as his life, the old child at the heart of him, and never let it go. . . The child is not meant to die, but to be forever fresh born." Here, MacDonald offers his own alternative to Wordsworth's picture of the "Boy" progressively enclosed in the prison house. The freshness, spontaneity, openness and imagination of the child can be retained in later life. In C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles*, although the original four children are excluded from Narnia as they grow older, we read in *The Voyage of The "Dawn Treader"* that Aslan has "another name" in our world, so he is not really lost. This is another way of saying that for the adult, Christianity provides the field of operation for the innocence and belief of those possessing the "child heart". The old Professor of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who is described as "a very remarkable man", seems clearly to be such an adult. In Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* books, on the other hand, Ransome's own passionate involvement with his child characters provides a general sense of an adult who has retained the capacities of childhood. After all, the real creator of the play-worlds and the real player of the books' splendid games is Ransome himself. Within the books, Captain Flint, who enthusiastically joins the polar expedition in *Winter Holiday*, also possesses these abilities. Mrs. Dixon says of him, "growing older and travelling round the world brought no sense to some folk." We see yet another variation on this theme in L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series. In the course of the first book, Anne reaches maturity through the

experiences of labour, responsibility and sorrow, but we are assured at the conclusion that "nothing could rob her of her birthright of fancy or her ideal world of dreams." And indeed, in *Anne of Avonlea*, although she has become a "sedate schoolma'am" of sixteen-and-a-half, we see her talking to herself, imagining wonderful adventures and animating with her fancy the landscape of Prince Edward Island, so much so that Diana is moved to assert, "Anne Shirley, you're only pretending to be grown up." This book also introduces Miss Lavendar, who "is one of those people who never grow old." In her, Anne "at last discerned a real 'kindred spirit'" and the result is a "fervent, helpful friendship. . . between a woman who has kept the freshness of youth in her heart and soul, and a girl whose imagination and intuition supplied the place of experience." Even in a later work like *Anne of Windy Poplars*, Anne can write, "But, oh, Gilbert, don't let's ever grow too old and wise. . . no, not too old and *silly* for fairyland."

In Romantic theory, the artist is such an ideal adult who has retained the qualities of the child. One of the central concerns of the Romantic Tradition in children's literature is, therefore, the elaboration of a metaphorical relationship between the child character and the artist producing the book. At a further remove, the child character also tends to carry more general suggestions of the imaginative element present in every human being, although often repressed or buried by everyday existence. As a result, these books have an odd doubleness about them—a sense that they are written for adults as well as for children, or, to put it another way, for the child heart whatever bosom it inhabits. These metaphorical parallels find expression in various ways. In the Anne books, the strong autobiographical element obviously establishes Anne as a portrait of the artist. However, it is also made clear that Anne is an externalization (rather like the Blakean emanation) of the spirit of joy, whimsy and fantasy repressed beneath the surface of a Calvinist society. At one point in *Anne of Green Gables*, we are told that Anne's criticism of the minister and his sermons are what Marilla herself "had really thought deep down in her heart for years, but had never given expression to. It almost seemed to her that those secret, unuttered, critical thoughts had suddenly taken visible and accusing shape and form in the person of this outspoken morsel of neglected humanity." We see a somewhat similar pattern in *Alice in Wonderland*. Through his imaginative identification with Alice, Carroll is able to release some childlike part of himself and to express its irreverence, independence, sense of absurdity, and weird fancies. When, however, he returns to his own social role in the framing poems and the Easter letter, this part of him is once more repressed and he lapses into Victorian sentimentality. However, this entire complex of parallels and motifs—imagination, childhood, maturity, the child heart and the artist—is perhaps most concisely embodied in the episode in E. Nesbit's *The Treasure Seekers* in which Oswald, who is the narrator of the books and so closely associated with Nesbit (he even indulges in reflections on the writing of books), and Noel, who is a young poet, meet on a train a lady who is also a poet and who is very reminiscent of Nesbit herself and of her desire to win recognition as a poet. Of this lady, Oswald says, "she didn't

talk a bit like a real lady, but more like a jolly sort of grown-up boy in a dress and hat.”

These rather lengthy comments of the Romantic Tradition in children’s literature are relevant to Pierre Berton because in *The Secret World of Og* he chooses to concern himself with the great themes that occupied the Romantic writers and because he seems in *Og* to be generally operating within the realm of discourse they defined. *Og* is a book about growing up and about the imagination. Consciously or unconsciously, it is very much grounded in the conventions of the Romantic Tradition, and the reader is, therefore, continually reminded of those earlier books. The Romantic writers generally based their characters on real children: on memories of themselves and their brothers and sisters (Nesbit, Ransome), on their own children (MacDonald’s daughter Irene), or on relatives or acquaintances (the Lucy Barfield of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and, of course, Alice Liddell). Berton’s book concerns his own children: Penny, Pamela, Patsy, Peter, and Paul. (It is Patsy, now an art student, who has provided the not very interesting illustrations for the new edition.) In these books, the parents commonly play little part. They are dead, away, or shadowy. So too, the elder Bertons are kept almost entirely off-stage. In Berton’s book, it is vacation time, and the whole mystique of the vacation and the “adventure” in British children’s literature seems not far in the background. Always in Romantic children’s books, there is a secret or private world from which most adults are excluded. In Berton’s case, there is an underground realm that recalls Carroll’s Wonderland and the mines of MacDonald’s *The Princess and The Goblin*. As is also usual, this hidden world parallels and reflects the “real” world in a variety of ways and functions as a comment upon it.

However, in spite of these similarities, Berton is an opponent of the Romantic Tradition, not its adherent. *Og* is essentially an attack on that tradition. In Berton’s conception of the underground realm, his divergence from the ideology of those earlier children’s books becomes evident. MacDonald’s goblins were clever: “as they grew mis-shapen in body they had grown in knowledge and cleverness”. However, hating poetry and hard of head, they lacked the imaginative powers that are central to the book’s value system. Burton’s goblin-like Ogs, on the other hand, are not very bright at all, but, as Penny puts it, “They’ve got good imaginations.” In fact, their lives are built on “pretending”. There is some hint here of Mary Norton’s *The Borrowers*, for the Ogs steal articles left unattended by surface people—primarily toys, old clothes, and comic books. With these, they escape the “dullness” of their earlier existence through a life of pretending to be what they are not. Like children, they imagine themselves to be cowboys, pirates, and spies. But for Berton, such pretense, while it may be fun for a while, is ultimately flat and unsatisfying. The Ogs are not only frustrating creatures, they are clearly undeveloped. “Silly” is the word the book returns to again and again. The words used to describe the stolen toys and clothing—“old”, “discarded”, “faded”, “rusty”, “broken”—suggest the thinness and unreality of their lives. While, therefore, the imagination is central to *Og* as to the books of the Romantic Tradition, Berton’s presenta-

tion of it is negative and determinedly anti-Romantic. He remains detached from and critical of the play and the pretending he describes, and there is, therefore, no sense of a parallel between the characters and the artist. Berton does not enter the child's world with the passionate nostalgia of Nesbit or Ransome, nor does he see mystical significance in it as do MacDonald and Lewis. He concedes that the imagination can be "fun", but a statement such as, "It's much more fun, you know, to pretend to be something you aren't", suggests the limitations of such fun. Berton rejects the Romantic conception of the child, and, as a result, his book has a strong and positive sense of the stages of an individual's development.

These stages of development are imaged in the history of the Ogs, and these creatures provide a means for analyzing and evaluating the imaginative life of a child. Originally, the Ogs lived in ignorance of the surface world. Their language consisted of only one word: "Og". Since Polly, the baby, speaks this same language, that earlier period of their history is presumably to be identified with infancy. As Berton sees it, this state is "dull". In the words of one of the Ogs, "there was absolutely nothing to do! . . . If you think it's fun to go around all day long eating mushrooms and saying 'Og' to everybody you are terribly wrong." When boredom finally drives them to discover the surface and to begin stealing toys and comic books, a wider, more complicated, and therefore more interesting life becomes possible for them. They enter a world of play and pretense comparable to that of a young child. "Fun" is now possible, and they learn to speak a real language, although many of them continue to speak in "ogs" since "it's easier. . . Don't take no brain work." That this level of development is still inadequate is clear from their general simplemindedness and from their fear of reality. When the book opens, the Ogs experience reality as either dull or frightening, but through their encounter with the children, they are moved toward the possibility of "a real adventure—not a game at all." This adventure is the exploration of the external world.

Implicit in the history of the Ogs is a theory of personality development that is the exact opposite of Wordsworth's myth of the growing boy. Berton appears to see the mind as characterized by an inherent thirst for novelty and complexity which drives the individual out of the thoughtless, solipsistic, inarticulate, and uninteresting world of infancy into the child's world of fantasy, play, and imagination. This world in turn, however, is eventually perceived as shallow, unreal, and also solipsistic, causing the individual to desire the realities of adulthood. This process of development necessitates effort, learning, acceptance of responsibility and willingness to face a frightening external world, but it leads the individual to that which is finally the only satisfying thing: empirical reality. Berton retains nothing of the Wordsworthian myth of life as a prison that traps the "growing boy". He sees no value in thinking you are something you aren't. The process of development, as he presents it, is linear and positive. The widest, most rewarding and least boring existence is based on engagement with the facts of the real world. It is perhaps not accidental, therefore, that one of Ogs pretends to be Captain Hook, thus recalling *Peter Pan* and the unhealthiness of any attempt to remain a child.

The stages of development embodied in the history of the Ogs find their analogue in the stages reached by the various children and their pets. The lower level of infancy is expressed through the important motif of confused identity. Polly the baby and Earless Osdick the cat both think they are dogs. On the other hand, Yukon King, the tiny dog, is a television addict who imagines himself the fierce sled dog of the Corporal Clancy of the Klondike series. The higher level of development finds expression in the older children who engage in "pretending" with varying degrees of consciousness. The youngest, Peter, "lived in a world of his own" with his toy cars and trucks. Pamela too is seen "daydreaming. . .lost in a world of her own." Although Penny is old enough to tell Peter, when he is pretending that he is in a moon rocket, not to "be so silly", she has her own game, "Dress-Up", and says, "let's pretend. . ." While the animals remain static in their unreal self-conceptions, the children, like the ogs, are capable of movement. The book ends triumphantly with Polly standing up for the first time and realizing that he isn't a dog. Similarly, Penny is forced during the adventure in Og to assume responsibility and to make decisions. In the course of the book she feels more and more grown-up. Essentially, she moves nearer to her mother's role, and at the end she seems to have left games and pretending behind. Pamela is the most puzzling of the children. Imaginative in a rather different sense from the others and endowed with a sense of the absurd, she is a seer of fairies who rather recalls Montgomery's Anne. However, her qualities receive no special treatment. At the end, she too appears to be moving toward a normal maturity. Her sister, Patsy, "couldn't help thinking how very like Penny she [Pamela] was beginning to sound."

As the adventure in Og comes to an end, Berton observes: "And now that it was all over, the afternoon seemed to have passed so quickly." The children have in these final pages become increasingly aware that it is time for dinner. One recalls the time-consciousness so important in *Through The Looking Glass* and also, if the comparison does not seem too absurd, the picture of the night of experience overtaking the world of innocence in Blake's "The Echoing Green". The sadness the children feel as they leave Og is for the passing of childhood, for Og is, of course, childhood, "og" being the word babies say. This, however, is all the nostalgia Berton permits himself. Primarily, his gaze is directed optimistically forward. Childhood is limited and finally boring and must be abandoned. He is not interested in looking back to it or in finding in it, as did the Romantics, values of continuing relevance. Nor does his book contain more than a hint or two that the world of experience may, after all, be as limited as that of innocence. If most of the greatest children's books are late Romantic works, Berton's books can best, perhaps, be categorized as a Modernist children's book in its hostility to dreams and its vigorous acceptance of what it deems to be the realities of life.

In conclusion, I might observe that Berton's empiricism and common sense seem to ally him more closely to the older American children's books than to the British tradition. In *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain never loses his sense of the foolishness of much of the activity of children and of the parallels that exist between the foolishness of children and that of

grown-ups. When Tom's gang decides to take up piracy on an island in the Mississippi, they eventually tire of the game and succumb to homesickness. Similarly, in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, a rather dreary little girl, spends all her time worrying about Aunt Em and Uncle Henry and striving to return to them. Perhaps one should think of this as some sort of inheritance of pioneer guilt about any temptation to shirk the serious business of the world. It is L.M. Montgomery who attempts to achieve a balance between the claims of imagination and reality. In the "haunted wood" episode of *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery shows her awareness of the potential dangers of the imagination, but her stronger awareness is of the inadequacy of her Calvinist environment. Anne gives the resulting compromise its finest expression in this pronouncement at the end of the school year: "I just feel tired of everything sensible and I'm going to let my imagination run riot for the summer. Oh, you needn't be alarmed, Marilla, I'll only let it run riot within reasonable limits." Later, in *Anne of Windy Poplars*, Montgomery is able to give a more mythic expression to this balancing of the aspects of the personality when she has Anne write to Gilbert, "In daylight I belong to the world. . .in the night to sleep and eternity. But in the dusk I'm free from both and belong only to myself. . .and you."

But such consideration have no place in Berton's story, and it is certainly ungenerous to compare his small book to the extensive work of L.M. Montgomery with its wide and humane vision. I must admit, however, that my local children's bookseller tells me that *Og* is a non-event with her customers and that she has had no positive feedback from the few purchasers. If, in fact, the book does not appeal to children, the reason seems obvious. Berton's attitude to the imagination appears to have rendered him incapable of imparting any real magic or wonder to the book. *Og* is, as I think I've suggested, almost an allegory, and it is somewhat Calvinistic in tone as it orders children in to the world of experience. And yet, as an attack on the Romantic Tradition, it is an interesting book. And it does have certain attractive qualities: reasonably well-defined characters, some good comic routines, and a prickly and affectionate sense of family life.

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