Analyzing Enchantment: Fantasy After Bettelheim

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It is a measure of how much some things have changed in the last hal dozen years that the journal of the Children's Literature Association o America, originally titled *The Great Excluded*, is now simply *Children's Literature*. No longer excluded, children's literature is today regularly scheduled for discussion at various conferences, and historical and critica works on the subject are published at an ever-accelerating rate. In the area of fantasy the work which has attracted the most attention during thi period has been Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*,[1] which ha been roundly praised by such prestigious critics as John Updike and Leslie Fiedler; indeed this is an important book, and one which should be read by everyone interested in fairy tales, fantasy, and/or children's literature. I contains a great number of insights and interpretations which should interest such readers.

Yet, some of the major premises of Bettelheim's book are ones which make me, in my capacities as writer for children and literary analyst o books aimed at a young audience, profoundly uneasy. That children will see Oedipus complexes and the like in all the traditional tales is a dubious proposition in itself. That such insights, gleaned from the tales, will cause them to solve all personal problems, find peace of mind, and live happily ever after simply flies in the face of human experience. Many adults who grew up on fairy tales – Charles Dickens, cited by Bettelheim as a lifelong addict, is an example – evidently have not found in them a panacea protecting them against life's difficulties. Bettelheim, unfortunately, claims little less. Take, for example, these sentences from the last page of his book

> Whatever may be true in reality, the child who listens to fairy tales comes to imagine and believe that out of love for him his parent is willing to risk his life to bring him the present he most desires. In his turn, such a child believes that he is worthy of such devotion, because he would be willing to sacrifice his life out of love for his parent. Thus the child will grow up to bring peace and happiness even to those who are so grievously afflicted that they seem like beasts. In doing so, a person will gain happiness for himself and his life's partner and, with it, happiness also for his parents. He will be at peace with himself and the world. (p. 310)

Skipping such obvious questions as whether such a view is likely to result from hearing tales in which parents abandon or otherwise threaten the welfare of their young – a variety which seemed so prevalent to me at the age of five or thereabouts that I refused to hear or read any tale closer to my own circumstances than "The Three Little Pigs" for several years – one might describe this desirable outcome as utopian. I am, however, hampered from so doing by the recent comments of an English critic, Tom Shippey, in a review of another American book in the same general area, Roger Sale's *Fairy Tales and After*.[2] Shippey castigates the vein of sunny optimism (which he calls "genteel illusion") in American writing for children (and evaluation of children's books), ending,

> "All one needs, one also has," smiles Dr. Seuss. "Accept whatever happens to happen and one will always get back alive and whole," moralizes Professor Sale. Such adages belong not to Utopia but to Noddyland.

That "Noddyland" (which means "land of dunces") may convey little meaning to North American readers would not concern Mr. Shippey, whose thesis is that "the real trouble that Professor Sale faces is that he is a well-brought-up American, while most of the authors he has to cope with – Milne, Grahame, Beatrix Potter, Lewis Carroll, Kipling, etc. – are in the first place English," and thus, it seems, more clear-eyed in conveying a sense of a world where cruelty and danger must be faced. Americans may be shocked at his casual dismissal of such works as *Charlotte's Web*,[3] which, as I recall, was honoured as the children's book of the century or something of the sort at a meeting of the C.L.A. about two years ago, but when one compares E.B. White's treatment of Templeton with Beatrix Potter's of Samuel Whiskers and his kin (Shippey reminds us that Tom Kitten's sisters' "eventual business-like role in life" was "as rat-catchers by contract") it must be admitted that he has a point. It is certainly true that "well-brought-up Americans" do seem to prefer to give their children the sort of stories Bettelheim calls "safe" or "vacuous" and thereby "cheat the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature" (p. 4). Bettelheim knows his opponent when he argues that it is wrong to pretend "that the dark side of man does not exist" and to imagine "that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child" (p. 7).

Although Shippey would probably consider Bettelheim's enthusiasm for literature-as-psychology another absurd American illusion, he will no doubt approve if *The Uses of Enchantment* persuades some over-protective adults that fantasy, involving (as the best fantasy always does) genuine danger and implacable retributions, is not necessarily harmful to the psyches of the young. But even if the book does have this effect, such adults may be subject to the flaw Shippey describes as "Revaluation. So, it's very wrong to preach – if you preach the wrong lesson." Adults, including Dr. Bettelheim, for all his repeated warnings against didacticism in any form,

are inevitably vigilant to discern the "lessons" tender youth will acquire from books; where Bettelheim sees these lessons as psychological insights, others are alert to political and social implications, which may be just as invisible to most children as I suspect oedipal conflicts are likely to be.

Let us consider, as an example, one of those relatively gentle American fantasies for the very young, Munro Leaf's now classic *Ferdinand the Bull.* It seems probable that this book earned the approval of adults in the 1930s because it could be seen as upholding ideals which were markedly popular at that time. One of these was kindness to animals. In 1932 Hemingway had published his *Death in the Afternoon*, which tended to glamourize bullfighting but predictably aroused protest against the sport as cruel. Political overtones may also have seemed timely here: the Spanish Civil War did not begin until 1936, too late to have affected the composition of *Ferdinand*, which was published that year, but there were many signs of trouble long before 1936. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935, for example. Many who sensed war coming elsewhere were actively trying to maintain peace: this was the era of Peace in Our Time and America First. Peacemakers may have seen a satisfactory moral in Ferdinand's dislike of fighting, and his final state makes a splendid emblem of the joys of peace. Those who knew their Bible might be reminded of the description of the Day of the Lord in *Micah* 4: 3-4:

> And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree . . .

In Ferdinand's case the fig tree is replaced by a cork tree, but a cork tree with corks on it, which brings the whole scene close to the nonsense world – as does the bull who sits down to smell flowers. This nonsense is absolutely necessary to the book. It is, of course, amusing to children of the age for which this picture book was intended, which is not an age likely to be receptive to undisguised propaganda about whatever worthy causes or global issues may concern their seniors. Even more important for this audience, however, is the function of nonsense in controlling the reader's reaction to cruelty: nonsense is the picture-book illustrator's prime device for "distancing" events which might otherwise seem uncomfortably close-to-home.[4] Carried to an extreme (as it usually is with Lear's limericks) nonsense removes the scene from any possible comment on reality; but a mixed style of the sort represented by the illustrations of *Ferdinand* need not undermine serious implications: it simply mitigates unpleasant aspects of the world depicted.

Unfortunately, though, adults rarely seem to understand nonsense and its functions. Among possible adult mistakes in this respect is the confusion of serious nonsense with mere buffoonery, the mistake the Disney people

evidently made in their interpretation of Ferdinand. Of course, pacifism was not such a fashionable attitude by the time the film was made, and imminent war may have been a factor in turning the tale into a didactic story inculcating the norms of male behaviour by poking fun at the sissy who played with girls ("the heifers all called him *amigo*") and had not mastered the manly arts of self-defense ("he never learned to fight").

If all this now seems offensive to feminists (and others) as well as thoroughly tasteless, it may be consoling to consider the extreme unlikelihood of any such message reaching the children who read or listened to the book itself then, or those who are still enjoying it. The work of the illustrator, Robert Lawson, makes it perfectly clear that this is a book about the cruelty and stupidity of the adult world. While the bull has his comic aspects (as do other heroes and heroines of the best modern fantasy for children), it is obviously the people who are truly ridiculous – especially the "bull experts." Their evident stupidity is almost sinister, needing only a change of headgear and an eyepatch or two to qualify them for the crew of the *Hispaniola*. It is hard to see how anyone could fail to identify with the bull, who looks so tiny in the great arena. To poke fun at Ferdinand is as bad as it would be to make Alice a figure of fun, setting up the standards of the Duchess or the Red Queen for us to admire, for, like *Alice in Wonderland*, Leaf's book is the type of fantasy, bordering on satire, which exploits a bemused innocent's view of an irrational (or inhumane) world.

It is not only American adults (*pace* Shippey), however, who, misled by their own preoccupations, fail to see the point of such fantasies. Not long ago a prolonged controversy raged in the pages of the London *Times Literary Supplement* itself over the beleaguered small hero of another fantasy, the venerable favourite *Little Black Sambo*. The opposition charged that Sambo is an insulting stereotype because he has a funny name, wears gaudy clothes, and eats a great many pancakes. No one noted the high incidence of funny names in the heroes of juvenile fiction: Bilbo Baggins, for example, and Huckleberry Finn. It was, however, noted for the defense that children like brightly coloured clothing and food high in calories, and that right-minded children would be likely to see Sambo as blessed with very kind parents who provided him with these delightful things. Of course, such right-minded children would also see that Sambo is noble, heroic, and resourceful. He deserves those pancakes: he turns the tables on the bullies who threatened to EAT HIM UP, but who were in fact turned to butter by their own stupidity.

No one has yet attacked this book for being frightening, which, in fact it is not – at least, at a distance from India. Its setting and exotic flourishes, such as butter labelled "ghi," distance it, as does the cartoonish aspect of Helen Bannerman's illustrations. Those who consider her pictures of "black" people insulting should be soothed by her later pictures of a white child, Little White Somebody-or-other, an insipid creation who has none of Sambo's character and appeal. Sambo is unquestionably the first black hero

of English children's literature, but, ironically, he cannot be tolerated toda by those who misread this fantasy as a sociological document, or those wh suffer from the misreadings of others. In the same way some feminists hav been protesting against *Peter Rabbit* because they find Flopsy, Mopsy, an Cottontail uninteresting in comparison with the adventurous Peter.

But are the children who enjoy such books interested in these issues? On who doubts it is Isaac Bashevis Singer, the only writer for childre (although, of course, not exclusively for children) who has ever won th Nobel prize for literature. This successful story-teller has recently said,

> Children read books, not reviews. Children don't read to find their identity, to free themselves from guilt, to quench the thirst for rebellion or to get rid of alienation. They have no use for psychology. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff. They love interesting stories, not commentaries, guides, or footnotes. When a book is boring, they yawn openly. They don't expect to redeem humanity, but leave to adults such childish illusions.[5]

None of this, however, tells us exactly what makes a story interesting aside from such elements as God and punctuation, neither of which is i itself a subject guaranteed to fascinate a young audience. Bettelheim coul well respond that it is stories which enable children to "find their identity' and so forth which interest them. Indeed, that might be said to be what hi book is primarily about. He argues repeatedly that fairy stories are onl powerful when experienced as literature: the enchantment of his titl "comes not from the psychological meaning of the tale (although thi contributes to it) but from its literary qualities – the tale itself as a work o art'" (p. 12). He warns adults against inflicting children with "adul interpretations" of the psychological meaning of the images and symbols o literature.

In fact, then, there is a cheering message here to the writer and/o admirer of serious fantasy for children today, in that voices are being hear defending the value of literature for children as an art form, as against a sugar-coated dose of instruction. Bettelheim's approach may often sound a if he views fairy tales as a handy method of indoctrination, which woul make him yet another manifestation of the pedagogical impulse, with u ever since "children's literature" became a separate category, whether w are thinking of the medieval *Babees Boke*, eighteenth century fable editions, the work of Cotton Mather, or currently fashionable espousals of such good causes as ecology and human equality. But, in spite of occasiona insistence on "the" meaning of a particular tale, Bettleheim recognizes tha different meanings will emerge for different people, or for the same peopl at different times. As Tolkien remarked in the preface to the second editio of *The Lord of the Rings*, such meanings are a matter of "applicability," which "resides in the freedom of the reader."

It may still give us pause to consider Bettelheim's insistent reiteration of the superiority of the "traditional" fairy tales to modern literature written for children, a view which Shippey describes as an aspect of "the accepted verities of the age." Where does that leave modern fantasy? It can be said that most of us are still using traditional material, just as the brothers Grimm did: and we now know that, like Isaac Bashevis Singer or any other gifted story-teller, the Grimms did not hestitate to revise, re-arrange, and augment their material to suit their own artistic vision. But few of us (and here Singer is among the few) are, or have been, writing works which bear any close resemblance to the traditional folk-tale. Would any child, however he or she may appreciate them, actually want to limit his reading to nothing but fairy tales? I strongly doubt it. For one thing, there are those who, like myself at an early age, are bound to prefer more distanced fantasies, such as *Peter Rabbit*, until they reach an age when *Hansel and Gretel* is bearable. And there are, equally, older children who may not yet be ready for *War and Peace* but who like a good long read, whether along the lines of *The Odyssey, The Dark is Rising, Anne of Green Gables, Tarzan of the Apes,* or *The Lord of the Rings.*

Those who think *The Lord of the Rings* is not for children, by the way, are at least partially mistaken. I know at least one eight-year-old who knows it in intimate detail, and ten-to-twelve-year-old connoisseurs are legion. This should not surprise those who remember that Tolkien wrote it primarily as a *story*, and stories, as Singer reminds us, are what children like to read. It is also a fantasy, and children are often better able to comprehend fantasy than literal-minded adults. We should not need Bettelheim to tell us that: as Antoine de St. Exupéry observed, grownups are so bemused with Matters of Consequence they rarely notice such truly important things as stars, roses, and elephants swallowed by boa-constrictors.

All these considerations give me some hope for the future of those of us who enjoy writing fantasy for a young audience, as long as we maintain our integrity by bearing in mind that we are primarily called to be story-tellers. Of course our integrity should also dictate that the stories we choose to tell have genuine meaning for us: how else could they have any for our audience? If we then pay attention to "logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff" we may have a chance of holding the attention of that audience, and maybe even of giving them something they will find valuable, however small a contribution this may make to their individual "peace and happiness" or to the redemption of humanity.

A question of no little interest to readers of *Canadian Children's Literature* remains. Are any of us likely to produce distinguished *Canadian* fantasy? While my opinions on this matter may precipitate an outcry in favour of revoking my citizenship, I would be compromising my own integrity if I expressed anything but the most hesitant and qualified hope

here. So far, Canadians have not been accused of the "snobbery" Americans such as Roger Sale find offensive in such British fantasies as the Winnie-the-Pooh stories – and note that other American critics have reacted in much the same way to Tolkien's treatment of Sam Gamgee, not to mention the much louder outcry against *Little Black Sambo* in U.S. circles. (Of course.) Nor have we won the unfavourable attention of British critics who object to what they see as an American assumption that red-blooded American boys always emerge as winners, an accusation sadly proved valid by the popular Disney mistreatment of *Ferdinand the Bull*. But the fact is that very little fantasy of any kind has yet emerged from Canada. No wonder that the others have not yet found what our Achilles' heel may be.

So far, the most substantial contribution of Canadians to the literature of fantasy has been one very much arising from the Canadian scene: the re-telling of folk-tales either originating among the native Indian and Eskimo populations or conserved from the European tradition by French Canadians. Canadian re-tellers of such tales have won the well-deserved respect of an international audience. But what about the kind of modern fantasy which is more complex than the simple handing-on of folk-traditions? What do we have to compare with the American flavour of E.B. White or the supremely English fantasies of Beatrix Potter? I cannot think of anything remotely comparable. The most successful fantasy produced by a "Canadian" writer in recent years is Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, which is set in England.

That we have not done so to date does not, of course, mean that Canadians will never evolve their own school of successful fantasy. The lack of such a school may be due to the impossibility of feeling ourselves "Canadian", whether we have been here for a dozen years or a number of generations, in the same sense in which writers like Tolkien and Beatrix Potter felt themselves to be "English." In that sense we, too, are "English" – or European or whatever, for most of us simply are not descended from those who inhabited our continent a few hundred years ago. Fascinating as we may find Indian legends to be, most of us cannot consider them *our* legends in the sense in which the modern British writer can claim the heritage of Celtic or Germanic legend. Some writers in the U.S. have overcome this handicap and achieved (for better or for worse) a distinctly "American" type of fantasy, however, so there would seem little reason why Canadians cannot do the same. But we had better remember that much good American writing in this vein still has roots in England and Europe. Ferdinand is a *Spanish* bull, after all, and heaven knows how many lands went into the making of Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea. We may hamper ourselves fatally if we keep our eyes rigidly fixed on Canadian ground.

Those who know my own work to be almost entirely in the area of Arthurian romance may suspect special pleading here. And, indeed, I must admit to a preference for a fantasy world which does not call for gimmicks

such as "maybe it was all a dream" to reconcile elements of the marvelous with a specific time and place. I cannot help agreeing with Tolkien that even so great a work as *Alice in Wonderland* ends a little flatly when all illusion is shattered by the necessity of a return to the here-and-now. That this may be a fatal flaw seems to be the opinion of the Canadian publishers who have politely declined my last book on the grounds that it has "no Canadian content." To be sure, Mark Twain put "American content" in an Arthurian frame, and T.H. White inserted a great deal of contemporary British content into *The Sword and the Stone*: but my interests are quite other from those of either of these very different writers, much as I admire them both. I cannot add local Canadian colour when I am interested in observing timeless truths in the relatively untrammelled freedom of a world which never existed anywhere except in the imagination of human beings.

Perhaps someone else will find a way of pulling this trick which I do not see. In my case, it would indeed smack of "pulling a trick" and thus a violation of artistic integrity and not worth trying to do. I am, at any rate, sure that if I do anything more of value for young readers it will have to be by following my own instinct as a story-teller, not by attempting to give the publishers and the Canadian public what I am told is wanted. And I would caution other Canadian writers against trying to write-to-order, unless they want to be hacks. If we are ever to see the day when Canadian fantasy is appreciated and celebrated elsewhere in the English-speaking world, or beyond, it will be the result of a story-teller's instinct, not of a response to popular demand for this-or-that "message".

In other words, I believe we can indeed call up spirits from the vasty deep, if we are willing to contemplate them as they truly are. I do not think they will answer us if we conjure them in the name of therapy, social reform, politics, progress, or even patriotism. Spirits worth calling up are not servile, although they may be of service in surprising and delightful ways.

NOTES

[1] *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, and Random House, Vintage Books, 1977). Citations in this article are from the Vintage Books edition.

[2] *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E.B. White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). Shippey's review, entitled "The Struggle with Cruelty," appeared in the London *Times Literary Supplement*, December 1, 1978, p. 1393.

[3]"Professor Sale tries to recoup with final chapters on *The Wizard of Oz,* Walter R. Brooks and E.B. White, but they seem unlikely to start a craze."

[4]The principles of "nonsense" which I assume to be generally familiar to students of the area are most fully set forth by Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952).

[5]Quoted in a newspaper reporting on the festivities at the time of the Nobel award; these remarks were said to have been addressed to the guests after the feast. Unfortunately I do not have either the name or the date of the paper from which I took the clipping.

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