Ogres in the Canadian Bush: The Fairy-Tale Subtext in Tim Wynne-Jones's ***The Maestro***

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Résumé: *Le roman de Tim Wynne-Jones intitulé* ***The Maestro*** *s'avère, à maints égards, une oeuvre réaliste. Or, à travers la trame d'un récit bien contemporain se tisse en filigrane un réseau d'emprunts à des contes fokloriques fort anciens. Les allusions directes et indirectes à ces récits traditionnels agissent comme un contrepoint à des préocupations sociales plutôt actuelles; ainsi, les références à un conte russe, "la mort de Koshchei l'immortel", permettent au héros, Burl, de mieux appréhender la complexe influence de son père abusif. La rédemption du héros s'accomplira dans la réécriture de l'épisode final du conte qui lui a servi de repère et de guide.*

Summary: *Tim Wynne-Jones's* ***The Maestro*** *is in many ways a typical realistic young adult novel. And yet woven into this contemporary story is a resonant web of traditional fairy-tale elements and motifs. Fairy-tale references, both overt and subtle, resonate against its contemporary concerns. Primary among these are the references to an obscure Russian fairy tale* ***The Death of Koshchei the Deathless****, a story which provides Burl with a powerful template for viewing his abusive father. Wynne-Jones's rewriting of the fairy-tale revenge ending provides a model of redemption for Burl.*

> Sometimes the door opens to a wizard, sometimes to an ogre.
>
> —— Nathaniel Orlando Gow

Tim Wynne-Jones's award-winning novel *The Maestro* is at first glance a contemporary young adult story grounded in the gritty realism of the "problem novel" genre. The protagonist Burl Crow suffers physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father and flees into the wilderness to escape him. Cal Crow is a dangerous, unpredictable man, and the reader is not spared the terror of Burl's relationship with him. As the novel follows Burl's

struggle to survive emotionally, it also deals with his physical journeys through the wilderness of northern Ontario, journeys that evoke the theme of "survival" so popular in Canadian fiction (as Margaret Atwood and others have noted). This and other characteristics have prompted Roderick McGillis to term the novel "redolently Canadian" in his review of the book.

And yet, as Gow's warning quoted at the beginning of this essay suggests, the novel is much more than this. Woven into this realistic, contemporary pattern is a resonant web of traditional motifs drawn from the European fairy-tale tradition. Fairy-tale references, both overt and subtle, run through the story and resonate against its contemporary concerns. Primary among these are the references to the obscure Russian tale *The Death of Koshchei the Deathless*,[1] a story which Burl reads near the outset of the novel and which provides him with a powerful template for viewing his abusive father. But there are also clusters of references to *Hansel and Gretel*, *Hop O' My Thumb* and other well-known stories, as well as to recurrent motifs from the fairy-tale tradition in general.[2] Understanding the interaction between the fairy-tale elements and the realistic plot makes this finely wrought novel even more powerful. Wynne-Jones raises fairy-tale expectations at every turn only to undermine them one by one. By the end, the fairy-tale world is reconfigured and transformed within the context of Burl's contemporary life.

The fairy-tale tradition is perhaps a natural subtext for a story about an abused child. Where else does one encounter such abundant and horrific examples of family violence? The tales retold by Perrault and the brothers Grimm are rife with wicked and murderous stepmothers, with parents who try to poison their children, abandon them in the woods or lock them up, and even with the passive, neglectful parents (like Cinderella's father) who simply fail to rescue their children from their abusive partners. In these tales the beleaguered young ones are often lost in a wilderness where they must undertake perilous journeys toward both survival and self-discovery. What more appropriate underpinning for the story of a contemporary boy's physical and psychological journey from darkness to comparative light?

As Alison Lurie has pointed out, fairy tales are in many ways more realistic than the "realism" of contemporary stories. She argues that children often grow up to realize that

> fairy tales had been right all along — the world [really is] full of hostile, stupid giants and perilous castles.... To succeed in this world you need ... some special skill or patronage, plus remarkable luck.... The other qualities that count ... [are] wit, boldness, stubborn persistence, and an eye for the main chance. (18)

These elements — and especially luck, persistence and the "eye for the main chance" — are certainly of major importance both in Burl's story

and in the fairy tales referred to throughout *The Maestro*. These are the qualities that allow Burl — like the disadvantaged heroes of traditional tales — to succeed against incredible odds.

The first section of the novel in which Burl defies his father, flees into the wilderness, and meets the extraordinary Nathaniel Orlando Gow, is dominated by references to the more familiar fairy tales. For instance, when Burl comes upon a trapper's cabin the first night, he notes that there are "no bowls of porridge cooling on the table" (28).[3] It becomes clear as he journeys further into the wilderness, further away from home, that Burl is consciously comparing his own trek to the fairy-tale journeys he has been reading about in *The Red Fairy Book*, which in turn have triggered memories of others he has heard in his childhood:

> In a fairy tale, the woods might be deep but the paths led to a river where you could trick the boatman; to a castle where you could steal a golden goose; to a clearing in the forest where you could kiss a princess in a glass coffin. Fairy-tale trees towered darkly above lost children, but there was always a way. (30)

The tone here clearly implies that at this point, Burl thinks that there is no "way" for him. As the fairy-tale references increase in these early pages, so does Burl's frustration that his own quest is not following the fairy-tale pattern:

> When you were hungry in a fairy tale, an old hag would pass by with a magic bowl or magic beans. Well, Burl had eaten what beans he could find, and when he awoke cold and damp in the morning, sure enough, the can was full again, but only with brown rainwater. (30)

Wynne-Jones bounces the fairy-tale references off Burl's bleak reality, highlighting the apparent gap between the two.

References to *Hansel and Gretel* and the closely related *Hop O' My Thumb* are particularly apparent in this first section. This is appropriate since Burl, like these children, is lost and fainting with hunger. Although *Hansel and Gretel* and *Hop O' My Thumb* veer off in different directions, the two tales begin almost identically, with poor parents abandoning their children in the forest. Both sets of lost and hungry children come upon a house in the deep woods: one house harbours a ravenous witch; the other, a ravenous ogre. In each case, the encounter with the threatening being constitutes a crucial test for the children, the single most important event in their passage from innocence to experience, and metaphorically from death to life.

Near the end of his wilderness trek, Burl becomes more and more like those archetypal abandoned children, desperate for food and facing death

from starvation. He becomes angry, "Angry that these fairy-tale words came unbidden to his mind. Useless ideas" (33). As Burl becomes more hopeless and exhausted, Wynne-Jones continues to set the realistic details of Burl's situation against the fairy-tale examples. The immediate effect of this is an undercutting of the traditional tales. Certainly their *magical* elements are definitively rejected, by Burl and probably by most readers. And yet, as the story progresses, we realize that for Burl — as for the characters of fairy tales — there *really is a path* through the forest after all. In the "bewitched forest" of the Grimms' tale, Hansel and Gretel come upon the witch's candy house. This is a place of great danger, certainly; and yet in the end, it provides the key to their future happiness in the form of the witch's wealth. Meeting the cannibalistic witch constitutes an encounter with death, but it also provides the means of rebirth into new life, and a way forward.

Unlike these fairy-tale children, Burl flees his parents (and especially his father) deliberately. Yet like the children in both stories, his parents are impoverished — financially and, most importantly, emotionally. Burl's journey through what proves to be a forest as perilous as the fairy-tale wood, leads him to a dwelling which proves to be of paramount significance in his life. For it turns out that despite his cynicism, Burl is following a path without realizing it: the vague trail sketched on the sky months before by a grand piano suspended from a helicopter. For it is just after he dismisses the fairy tales as "useless" that he comes upon Ghost Lake and Gow's cabin:

> At the head of the bay was a structure like nothing he had ever seen before, a grey shingled pyramid with tall triangular windows. There was also a broad deck that narrowed to a lower deck. It was from this building — for there were no others on the lake — that the sound must be coming.
>
> It was a piano. And the song glided out to Burl from the pyramid like a small boat on the green lake in the sun-drenched air. He had only to reach out to it, climb aboard, and the song would take him there. (34)

The description of Gow's cabin is charged with fairy-tale references, from its isolation and the prominence of the number three in its architecture (pyramid shape, triangular windows) to the magical quality of the music and the metaphor of the song as a boat (echoing Burl's reference to the boatman earlier). And near the climax of the novel, when Burl returns there with his father, Wynne-Jones reminds us again of the parallels with *Hansel and Gretel* with Burl's thought: "He had feared the cabin would not be there. That it would have dissolved like sugar" (184).

In this cabin Burl finds not a witch or an ogre, but an eccentric musician who offers arrowroot cookies instead of gingerbread shutters: Nathaniel Orlando Gow. This amazing man seems harmless enough. Yet in the same

way that the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* and the ogre in *Hop O' My Thumb* are doubles of the evil parents (the stepmother in the first and the father in the second), so Nathaniel Orlando Gow mirrors Burl's own father in many ways. While he is not physically dangerous, Gow plays the same kinds of psychological games with Burl that Cal does. Like Cal, he is moody, mercurial, unpredictable; both men keep Burl constantly off-balance. Burl's relationships with Cal and Gow are the two pivotal ones in the book, and yet both are excruciatingly difficult — even impossible.

Burl's brief stay with Gow is also punctuated by fairy-tale references. The strange man has "dazzling eyes" (38), and a penchant for games and disguises. His playful metamorphoses from "Baron von Liederhosen" (39) to "Sir Chauncey Cakebread, eminent musicologist and rocketeer" (40) and back to himself recall both the magical transformations and the importance of wealth and royalty in fairy tales. Most importantly, Burl's negotiations with Gow for permission to stay the night are couched in the language of fairy tale, as Gow makes the connections explicit:

> '"Is there room for me?" Is that what you said?'
>
> Burl began to feel slightly more optimistic. 'Yes,' he said. 'Just for tonight.'
>
> 'Uh-uh-uh,' said Nog, shaking his finger. 'Not so fast. You must knock first.'
>
> 'I have to knock?'
>
> 'Yes,' said Nog. 'Kind of like in a story where the hero stands before a magic door and he must rap on it three times if he expects it to open. That kind of thing.' He rapped on the table top. *Knock, knock, knock.* (50)

Burl must make *three* attempts to gain admission, and he almost gives up. Yet he tries a third time: "Then he turned around and rapped firmly on the cabin door. Three times. It opened immediately" (51). As in fairy tales, three is the magic number. The hero must persist, must make repeated, almost ritualized attempts before he gains what he desires.

Yet the fairy-tale expectations are also diverted, set askew. Instead of the Three Bears returning to bowls of cooling porridge, an utterly real Canadian bear pounds on the cabin door and terrorizes Gow, allowing Burl his first heroic act. And what does Burl gain here in Gow's cabin? Not a treasure, and certainly not a princess. Instead, he finds more realistic and ambiguous trophies: four chords of an oratorio, and the glimpse of the world of music that this affords him; a few hours with a strange alternative father-figure; a temporary haven, in the form of the cabin; and time to think, to reconstitute himself.

The references to *Hansel and Gretel* and *Hop O' My Thumb* peak in the chapters concerned with Burl's interactions with Gow, culminating in the news of Gow's death and Burl's journey out of Ghost Lake by plane. The latter is a journey across water that in many ways mirrors Hansel and Gretel's passage across the lake away from the dead witch's cottage and into their newly configured life with their father. Yet here again Wynne-Jones plays with the fairy-tale elements in interesting ways. Although Gow's warning to Burl that "sometimes the door opens to a wizard, sometimes to an ogre" (51) proves true in the sense that Gow incarnates features of both, he is not a figure of evil like the fairy-tale villains. He does die, but he is not killed by the protagonist like the witch is in *Hansel and Gretel*. Nor is he "punished" within the narrative for his "ogre" manifestations in the way that the ogre father is "punished" for his greed with his tragic murder of his own daughters and the loss of all his wealth. There is no sense that Gow's sudden death has anything whatever to do with his encounter with Burl at the cabin, but instead with his addiction to drugs. And while the fairy-tale characters gain wealth and new life through murdering the witch and tricking the ogre, Burl accesses a different kind of wealth, although he does not recognize this at first. Burl's life-changing experience hinges on his encounter with Gow, and the personal interactions between them.

After this point in *The Maestro*, the references to *The Death of Koshchei the Deathless* become more apparent.[4] The story of Koshchei the Deathless is the most important specific tale referred to in the novel. It is introduced in the first chapter and referred to off and on throughout the book, even providing the title of the chapter in which Burl's teacher Mrs. Agnew meets his threatening father. The fairy tale is first mentioned when Mrs. Agnew, in an attempt to get Burl talking, asks him to read aloud to her from *The Red Fairy Book*:

> 'Out loud?' he asked. Was she serious? She seemed to be. He looked at the table of contents. 'Koschei the Deathless,' he read.
>
> She didn't look up. 'Now that sounds really scary,' she said.
>
> 'It sounds like my father,' said Burl. (16)

From this moment on, the character Koschei the Deathless becomes for Burl a powerful image of the cruel man his father has become. The story feeds his fantasies of revenge on Cal, as he dreams of killing his father:

> Over and over he replayed the scene at the secret place. Sometimes he killed Cal — drilled his little pocket knife right into Cal's heart. Then Tanya, released from her evil spell, would fall at his knees and beg his forgiveness. Sometimes he would forgive her. Sometimes Mrs. Agnew showed up and stood with him over the dead body of his father.

'So this is Koschei the Deathless,' she would say.

'Not any more,' Burl would answer. (27)

This passage suggests that the story brings out the latent violence in Burl's character; however, it becomes clear that, by identifying Cal with a stereotypical fairy-tale villain, Burl is also able to place his father psychologically at a distance, and is thus (the narrative implies) able to launch out on his own for the first time.

The Russian fairy tale is not well known, and is in fact a long and sprawling narrative that manages to cobble together almost every traditional folk motif listed in Stith Thompson's index. The story's protagonist, Prince Ivan, has three sisters who marry three supernatural bird-princes and go off to live with them. Ivan soon grows lonely without his sisters and goes in search of them. His journey brings him to the home of the warrior princess Marya Morevna, with whom he falls in love. They marry, and live happily until the princess decides to go off to war again. She leaves her husband at home with the warning: DO NOT OPEN THAT CLOSET (a nice gender twist on the Blue Beard story). Of course, as in *Blue Beard*, the bored spouse cannot resist opening the closet. Prince Ivan finds inside the mighty ogre Koschei the Deathless, bound with twelve chains. Koschei pleads for a drink, and when Ivan gives him all the water he asks for, he breaks his chains and escapes. He soon captures Princess Marya Morevna and carries her off.

The remainder of the narrative concerns Ivan's repeated attempts to reclaim his wife from the thief. He succeeds several times, but is foiled at every turn by Koschei the Deathless, whose magical horse always warns his master of Ivan's presence in time. Ivan is even cut up into pieces by Koschei the Deathless, but is put back together and restored to life by the three supernatural husbands of his sisters. His only hope of success lies in acquiring a magical horse like his enemy's. Such an animal can only be won from the deadly witch Baba Yaga, but he finally does get the horse after many trials. In the end Ivan's magical horse cracks Koschei's skull, and Ivan clubs him to death and burns him on a pyre, scattering his ashes to the wind, proving that he is not "deathless" after all.

This is a long, rambling story that incorporates an extravagant number of classic fairy-tale motifs: the quest, the series of tests and trials, the intervention of magical beings and helpful animals, and the small protagonist pitted against the large, implacable foe. The most important of these for *The Maestro* is the latter motif, and all the complex resonances between Koschei the Deathless and Cal. Interestingly, the fairy tale in *The Red Fairy Book* is actually entitled "The Death of Koschei the Deathless." Wynne-Jones's shortening of the title in *The Maestro* hints at the different ways in which this story is evoked and echoed. For clearly Wynne-Jones has not used the story as a

"template" for *The Maestro*'s plot, but has instead carefully selected a few key elements of the tale to draw out the emotional resonances of Burl's story.

For instance, when Burl confronts his father Cal just before fleeing into the bush, he shouts "YOU STEAL EVERYTHING!" (23). This conjures up the crime of Koschei the Deathless: he steals everything, but especially what is most important to Prince Ivan, his beloved wife. Burl has no wife, but Cal has certainly stolen the things that are most important to him at the age of fourteen: a stable, happy home, his mother's ability to give love to him, his confidence, and his sense of self. The theft of this last quality is highlighted painfully in his parting from his teacher, Natalie Agnew, at the end of the school year:

> She gave him *The Red Fairy Book*. He thanked her, but when she wasn't looking, he left it behind in his desk. He was afraid of what Cal might do if he took it home. The only stories that were safe were the ones in his head, wrapped in silence, where Cal couldn't find them. (17)

In Cal, the references to the ogre figure of *Hop O' My Thumb* and the ogre Koschei the Deathless merge and magnify. He is described at the outset of the novel as having a "coiled mass of shoulder and gut" and "axe-handle wrists" (13). In the first chapter he strides toward Burl in "thousand-league boots" (10) instead of the "seven-league boots" used by the ogre in *Hop O' My Thumb*. The ability of Koschei the Deathless's magical horse to sense theft and warn his master is echoed in Cal's uncanny talent for sensing the loss of something; after his furtive trip home, Burl muses that "Cal would notice the .22 was gone. He had a nose for things of his that went missing" (170). Later Burl thinks that keeping the cabin's key a secret is likely useless, since he imagines that "Cal could smell a key as quick as he could smell live game" (184). And the brief chapter where Natalie Agnew calls at the house looking for Burl and meets the threatening Cal is entitled "Koschei the Deathless."

But the tale of *Koschei the Deathless* resonates most profoundly in the echoes between Koschei's fiery end at the close of the fairy tale and the catastrophic fire at the cabin in which Cal is badly burned — and almost dies. Knowing the way the fairy tale ends adds depth and resonance to the fire scene of *The Maestro*. In the fairy tale, Prince Ivan's burning of Koschei the Deathless is a triumphant moment of revenge, all the more so for being such a hard-won victory. He not only slays the ogre, but he also ensures that his body is reduced to nothingness: "Afterwards the Prince heaped up a pile of wood, set fire to it, burnt Koschei the Deathless on the pyre, and scattered his ashes to the wind" (53). Thus, the ogre and the threat he poses are completely annihilated.

Wynne-Jones's novel deliberately veers away from the fairy tale here. Despite Burl's vivid fantasies of taking revenge on Cal, Burl's story is ulti-

mately about redemption rather than revenge. For although we're told that Burl does not make a conscious decision to save his father (196), at some level he rejects the fantasy of revenge at the crucial moment and chooses to rewrite the fairy tale. Most significantly, that decision to let the "Deathless" one remain deathless transforms Cal from an ogre into a human being. Up to this point in the narrative, Cal has been portrayed as a wholly evil character, like the stereotypical villains of the fairy tales. But Cal's raving confession after the fire opens a window onto his personal torment, and reveals a complex human person. The reader is forced suddenly to confront moral questions about the nature and origins of evil and the availability of redemption. It is perhaps significant that it is on the morning after the fire but before Cal tells Burl the truth about Laura's death that Burl gives up "the dark pleasure of hating his father" (200), simply because he has no energy left for hate. He is, we might say, rewarded for this tentative step toward reconciliation with Cal's revelations, which give Burl the pieces of knowledge he needs to understand his father and to live his own life.

Just as Prince Ivan's attainment of a magical horse like that of Koschei the Deathless finally makes him equal to his foe, so does the fire equalize Burl and his father. Cal's injuries reduce him to childlike helplessness; father and son exchange roles, and it is Burl who must drag his injured father out of the woods by his own strength. Cal becomes vulnerable at last, and his "ogre" identity crumbles as we, along with Burl, see him reduced to immobility and dependence. It is no accident that Burl's ability to drag his father out of the bush depends on his recollection of Cal's building a travois many years before. Across the painful gulf of time, Burl is able to access a part of his father that helps and heals.

The fire scene and its aftermath are also shot through with references to the Book of Revelation, the prophetic book of the Bible which is the inspiration for Gow's oratorio. Indeed, the chapter in which the cabin burns is entitled "The First Trumpet," a hint that the fire here is a fire of judgment just like that of the Revelation. Yet the fire of the Book of Revelation is intended as a purifying force, designed to destroy what is sinful and leave behind a purified world. As these references to apocalypse and judgment knit themselves together with echoes of *The Death of Koschei the Deathless*, we see how determinedly Wynne-Jones pursues an agenda of redemption. For the ogre father who emerges from this fire is a wounded yet authentic person — a man "purified" of his evil rage, even if only temporarily. And the son who emerges from the woods with his burned father is a very different young man from the one who first waded out to meet the Maestro on the cabin's deck. He is, at the end, a person who can wear new shoes that "fit him well" (223).

By the novel's end, the reader familiar with fairy tales can see how traditional motifs and elements are woven into this contemporary story and yet undermined at every turn. Like the disadvantaged fairy-tale heroes, Burl

must also journey through dark forests, undergo a series of tests and trials, and face his more powerful foe in a tense, climactic battle. Yet Burl does not win a treasure trove, a castle, or a bride. Despite his "wizard" associations, Nathaniel Orlando Gow does not ultimately provide a new "home" for Burl in the form of the cabin on the lake; indeed, the property is never his to give, but belongs instead to the prospector Japheth Starlight. Moreover, in *The Maestro* the evil antagonist is transformed rather than annihilated, and although Burl eventually achieves dominance over his father, becoming the "small" protagonist triumphant over the "large" antagonist, this is most certainly not his path to "happily ever after."

Instead, Burl must find his place in a reconfigured world within a new kind of family provided by his teacher Mrs. Agnew and her husband, and become a "son" once again. The magic number, the "enchantment" that will supply home, is not Gow's number three, but instead the seven-digit telephone number that Natalie Agnew inscribes on everything in Burl's lunch bag. It is Natalie who first introduces Burl to the fairy-tale world in the beginning, and it is she — a contemporary fairy godmother — and not the wizard Gow, who provides Burl with some sort of fairy-tale ending. This, in the realistic world of the contemporary Canadian novel, is the best Burl can hope for; and yet, it is enough.

Notes

1 The story is found in Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book* (42-53).

2 My thinking about the fairy-tale subtext of this novel has been wonderfully enriched by the discussions in the children's literature courses I have taught at UBC and SFU. I am particularly indebted to two students, Arwen Brenneman (UBC) and Asia Wilson (SFU) whose insightful comments both in class and in essays deepened my appreciation of Wynne-Jones's use of fairy-tale motifs.

3 All citations are from the 1995 Groundwood edition.

4 Wynne-Jones alters the spelling of the name to "Koschei" in *The Maestro*.

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