

The “Childish Imagination” of John Ruskin and George MacDonald: Introductory Speculations

John Pennington

The narrator of *Lilith*, Mr. Vane, while encountering the strange realm of fairyland, remarks: “I was lost in a space larger than imagination . . .” (35). Such a claim seems appropriate when describing the proliferation of fantasies and fairy tales during the Victorian period. One need only look at the impressive anthologies of fairy and fantasy literature catalogued in Jonathan Cott’s *Beyond the Looking Glass*, Jack Zipes’s *Victorian Fairy Tales*, and Michael Patrick Hearn’s *Victorian Fairy Tale Book* to realize the magnitude of the undercurrent of literature that seems to have captured the Victorian imagination. Indeed, the Victorian readers of fantasy and fairy tales were cast into a “space larger than imagination” (*Lilith* 35).

The Victorians became enthralled with the “classic” fairy tales, particularly those by Grimms and Anderson: Edgar Taylor’s translation of the Grimms’ tales—*German Popular Stories* (1823; 1826; and numerous subsequent editions)—and Anderson’s *Wonderful Stories for Children* (1846) cemented the fairy tale in the Victorian imagination. John Ruskin’s original fairy tale, *The King of the Golden River* (written in 1841, but published in 1851), a reworking of various Grimm tales, symbolically legitimized fairy discourse for Victorian writers and readers. Michael Patrick Hearn contends that “the coronation of Victoria in 1837 marked the arrival of a golden age for the literary British fairy tale” (xix), a boon for the fairies so to speak. Even Dickens and Thackeray wrote original fairy tales. In fact, Harry Stone in *Dickens and the Invisible World* suggests that fairy tales are at the heart of Dickens’s greatest novels, generating the “fundamental characteristics of his art: the impulse toward fantasy, transformation, and transcendence” (xi). It would be naive, however, to assume that the popular acceptance of fairy tales—classic and original—was a result of a benign belief in the simple entertainment value of the tales. Fairy tales, a part of nursery education, were viewed as instructional primers for children. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes contends that a fairy tale must be seen as “a *symbolic act*” (6) **[end of page 55]** grounded in historical awareness. The “fairy tale assumes great importance,” argues Zipes, “because it reveals how social

mores and values were induced in part through literature and constituted determinants in the rearing of an individual child” (33). The fact that Wilhelm Grimm continually revised the Grimms’s collection “to make the tales more proper and prudent for bourgeois audiences” (Zipes in *Brothers* xxvi) reinforces the claim that fairy tales were viewed as instructional documents. But many of the Grimm tales were morally ambiguous and often filled with extreme violence. Humphrey Carpenter argues that “fairy tales . . . occupy a moral no-man’s land . . . [A]s a vehicle for organised moral instruction the fairy story leaves a lot to be desired” (4). Consequently, the Victorians hit an impasse: they admired fairy tales, though they desired a collection of tales that promoted moral and social virtues. A mid-century manifesto on the fairy tale—Charles Dickens’s “Frauds on the Fairies”—helps put all this in perspective. Published on October 1, 1853, the essay satirically attacks those writers—particularly George Cruikshank—who tampered with traditional fairy discourse to promote moral agendas. Dickens’s retelling of *Cinderella* finds the waif joining the Juvenile Bands of Hope, marrying the Prince who is “completely covered from head to foot with Total Abstinence Medals” (440), dedicating her life to moderation and abstinence, and, of course, living happily ever after.

To understand the Victorian fairy tale, then, we must understand the Victorian attitude toward these tales—and toward children. John Ruskin, the greatest Victorian art and social critic, and George MacDonald, arguably the greatest writer of original fairy tales during the nineteenth century, somewhat reveal how the Victorians viewed the fairy tale. By examining these two friends we see that two attitudes toward the fairy tale contended with each other: the conservative and the radical.

Ruskin, the *conservative*, paradoxically argued for the need to preserve fairy tales unblemished by overt moral doctrine, yet suggested that children need shielding from the ugliness of the world. Ruskin, in effect, recalls the Golden Age of childhood—as mirrored in the fairy tales—recapturing in memory the childish im- [56] agination lost to the experienced world. MacDonald, on the other hand, the *radical*, argued for the inherent goodness and vitality of the childish imagination, an imagination that all should possess. Whereas Ruskin relegates the fairy tale to the nursery and to fond memories of childhood, MacDonald liberates these tales by rocking the cradle. He uses the fairy tale to remythologize the nineteenth century by creating a “space larger than imagination” that will embrace childhood innocence, adult experience, and the religious imagination. MacDonald

argues for the social and aesthetic qualities of these tales.

Before discussing Ruskin and MacDonald, we should return once more to Charles Dickens and his attack on the “Frauds on the Fairies,” for Dickens seems to embody a seemingly ambiguous and somewhat contradictory attitude toward fairy tales, which aligns him with Ruskin. Dickens argues:

In a utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected
[I]t becomes doubly important that the little books themselves, nurseries of fancy as they are, should be preserved. To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact. (435)

Yet Dickens also suggests that such tales do have a specific purpose since their “usefulness” is to teach children “forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many such good things have been first nourished in the child’s heart by this powerful aid” (435). Dickens’s own *Cinderella* most certainly promotes these virtues. When directly attacking Cruikshank, Dickens writes: “He has no greater moral justification in altering the harmless little books than we should have in altering his best etchings” (436). These “harmless little books,” Dickens argues, need preservation both for the child and for adults because they have “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” (435). *Nostalgia* is perhaps the best word to describe Dickens’s attitude toward fairy tales. For Dickens the fairy tale recalls childhood innocence through the childish imagination, a tonic to the industrial revolution and the ills created by it. Harry Stone argues that after “Frauds on the Fairies” the “fairy tale now stood at the center of [Dickens’s] imaginative and social be- [57] liefs; it was a shorthand way of referring to and dramatizing those beliefs” (15).

Ruskin, who uses nostalgic terms to define the fairy tale, belongs in the Dickensian camp. In his autobiography *Praeterita*, he admits that he was raised on fairy stories, and so it seems consistent that his first work of literature was a fairy tale. Written when he was just twenty-two—and written for the young girl Effie Gray, whom he would eventually marry—*The King of the Golden River* was a reworking of various Grimm tales. In his

autobiography, however, Ruskin had little to say positively about the tale:

[It] was written to amuse a little girl; and being a fairly good imitation of Grimm and Dickens, mixed with a little true Alpine feeling of my own, has been rightly pleasing to nice children, and good for them. But it is totally valueless, for all that. I can no more write a story than compose a picture. (303)

Ruskin's negative view may reflect his belief that the tale *was* actually "valueless" because it was merely "pleasing to nice children, and good for them," not on the same level as his "great" works for adults: *Modern Painters*, *The Stones of Venice*, and *Unto this Last* to name a few. Thus it seems quite ironic that scholars see in *The King of the Golden River* many themes that anticipate Ruskin's career. Suzanne Rahn, for example, argues that "for students of Ruskin [the fairy tale] has value as an early and characteristic articulation of his social and economic philosophy" (1).

When we look at other documents by Ruskin on fairy tales we see a similar pattern. In "Fairy Stories" (1868), written as a Preface to *German Popular Stories* illustrated by George Cruikshank, Ruskin announces that he is reluctant to eulogize the fairy tales "because there is in fact nothing very notable in these tales, unless it be their freedom from faults which for some time have been held to be quite the reverse of faults, by the majority of readers" (233). Much of Ruskin's agenda in the Preface is to support the Grimm tales by renouncing, like Dickens, the plethora of satiric, moral, and didactic fairy tales invading the nursery (many of which, ironically, Cruikshank also wrote and illustrated).

One fault that Ruskin finds with these modern, tampered tales is that they are addressed to "children bred in school-rooms and drawing-rooms, instead of fields and wood . . ." (233), and he chastises the satiric tale because "children should laugh, but not mock . . . They should be taught, as far as they are permitted to concern themselves with the characters of those around them, to seek faith- [58] fully for good, not to lie in wait maliciously to make themselves merry with evil . . ." (234). In fact, Ruskin argues that the modern fairy tales, unlike the Grimm tales, have lost "the simplicity of [the] conception of love . . . [which] in the heart of the child, should represent the most constant and vital part of its being; which ought to be the sign of the most solemn thoughts that inform its awakening soul and, in one wide mystery of pure sunrise, should flood the zenith of it heaven, and gleam on the dew at its feet . . ." (234). This is Ruskin getting nostalgic.

Furthermore, fairy tales must teach the lesson of love without turning

into “the hieroglyph of an evil mystery” (234), he claims, because “a child should not need to choose between right and wrong. It should not be capable of wrong; it should not conceive of wrong” (235). Ironically, Ruskin calls for a fairy tale that teaches children strict moral lessons, albeit traditional or “universal” morals. But Dickens and Ruskin actually condemn the moral fairy tales not because they are primarily didactic, but because they are not artistic, and yet they seem to approve of the yoking of the artistic and the didactic.

The “classic fairy tales” of Ruskin’s youth are those which measure up to his standards; he believes these tales provide a clear moral function:

Children so trained have no need of moral fairy tales; but they will find in the apparently vain and fitful courses of any tradition of old time, honestly delivered to them, a teaching for which no other can be substituted, and of which the power cannot be measured; animating for them the material world with inextinguishable life, fortifying them against the glacial cold of selfish science, and preparing them submissively, and with no bitterness of astonishment, to behold, in later years, the mystery—divinely appointed to remain such to all human thought—of the fates that happen alike to the evil and the good. (“Fairy Stories” 235-36)

For Ruskin, the fairy tale becomes a multi-vitamin, a bowl of high-energy breakfast cereal chockfull of nutrients to build strong bones [59] and moral fiber. Yet there seems to be an inconsistency in Ruskin’s claims: he favors the traditional fairy tales over the modern moral, satiric, and didactic tales, but he also seems to suggest that the fairy tale must properly guide children. *Submissively* is the key word in the above quotation; Ruskin finds that children must be submissive to the tale, which will teach them proper ways of knowing the world. Consequently, Ruskin’s arguments against the modern tales are used to defend the classic tales and sound quite in line with Dickens’s claim in “Frauds on the Fairies.”

We can see a similar strain in the essay “Fairy Land: Mrs. Allingham and Kate Greenaway,” which Ruskin delivered as Lecture IV in *The Art of England* series. An adamant admirer of Greenaway’s drawing of young, innocent Victorian girls, Ruskin saw in her work a return to childhood innocence that recalled his fond memories of the Grimm tales and the *Arabian Nights*. Children need their childish imagination to play freely: “One of the most curious proofs of the need to children of this exercise of the inventive and

believing power . . . you will find in the way you destroy the vitality of a toy to them, by bringing it too near the imitation of life” (329). To Ruskin, “the child falls in love with a quiet thing, with an ugly one—nay, it may be, with one, to us, totally devoid of meaning” (329). Notice how Ruskin’s adult imagination is separate from the childish imagination. Furthermore, Ruskin concludes that the art of Allingham and Greenaway “intends to address only childish imagination, and . . . to entertain with grace” (332).

In general, we can see that Ruskin has an ambiguous—even a contradictory—theory of fairy tales: he respects them in their simplicity as tales of beauty to inspire the childish imagination; however, he believes that children benefit because the tales have little meaning beyond beauty—they are in a sense quite useless. Ruskin seems hesitant to put much stock in the mere qualities of the child; he looks with nostalgia on childhood as lost innocence in an experienced world. Thus the fairy tale has an archaeological interest as a museum of childhood. George Landow argues that Ruskin felt “the most valuable, most educational, most *moral* function of art is [60] simply to be beautiful . . . [He] believes that exercising the young imagination is itself a most valuable purpose” (34). If this is true, then it seems ironic that Ruskin did not defend fairy tales more aggressively. Landow even links Ruskin with Dickens: “like Dickens, Ruskin works within a moral and philosophical tradition which held that feeling and imagination play, and should play, crucial roles in moral decision; so that to develop the imagination is to develop a mature human mind” (34). Though Landow’s comments seem valid, Ruskin’s and Dickens’s commentaries on fairy tales remain somewhat ambiguous since they are hesitant to argue for a complete freedom of the childish imagination. Ruskin and Dickens are not wholeheartedly Wordsworthian.

When we turn to George MacDonald, we see an attitude that both contrasts and “completes” Ruskin’s and Dickens’s. Though Ruskin and MacDonald began their careers writing fairy tales, only MacDonald framed his canon with them—*Phantastes* (1858) to *Lilith* (1895)—suggesting that MacDonald invested much energy in *Faery*. Ironically, the bulk of MacDonald’s fiction is traditional triple-decker realistic novels and, with the exception of *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865) and a few others, rather forgettable, if not downright embarrassing. C. S. Lewis, the great admirer and popularizer of MacDonald, admits that MacDonald was “seduced” into writing realistic novels because of the money.

MacDonald, in fact, complains about his career as a writer of fairy

tales. On one occasion he challenged an *Athenaeum* review of *Phantastes* because the reviewer called “it an allegory and judge[s] or misjudge[s] it accordingly— as if nothing but an allegory could have two meanings” (Greville MacDonald 297). On another occasion MacDonald, discussing his editorship of *Good Words for the Young*, remarks that falling readership may be attributed to the fact that “there is too much of what he [Strahan, the publisher] calls the fairy element. I have told him my story [*The Princess and the Goblin*] shall be finished in two months more *I know it is as good work of the kind as I can do, and I think will be the most complete thing I have done . . .*” (Greville MacDonald 411-12). Thus we see that **[61]** MacDonald takes his fairy-tale writing quite seriously, for the fairy tale is an artistic object worthy to be measured against the literary canon of the day.

Even though Ruskin and MacDonald were intimate friends, Ruskin has little to say about MacDonald’s fairy tales. One comment Ruskin makes is a telling one, however. After having read “*The Light Princess*,” Ruskin writes to MacDonald:

I have been lingering over the *Light Princess*, trying to analyze the various qualities of mind you show in it. I am certain that it will not do for the public in its present form:—owing first, to some of your virtues;—that you see too deeply into things to be able to laugh nicely—you cannot laugh in any exuberant or infectious manner—and the parts which are intended to be laughable are weak. Secondly, it is too long and there is a curious mixture of tempers in it—of which we will talk—it wants the severest compression. Then lastly, it is too amorous throughout—and to some temperaments would be quite mischievous—You are too pure-minded yourself to feel this—but I assure you the swimming scenes and love scenes would be to many children seriously harmful—Not that they would have to be cut out—but to be done in a simpler and less telling way. We will chat over this. Pardon my positive way of stating these things—it is my inferiority to you in many noble things which enables *me* to feel them and prevents you. (qtd. in Raeper 222)

Is this Ruskin as Mrs. Barbauld? As Mrs. Trimmer? As Mr. Bowdler? As Mr. Cruikshank?

Ruskin’s negative critique of “*The Light Princess*” is consistent with his conservative view of the fairy tale, for such tales should not tax children

but present them with a beautiful world devoid of strife. Perhaps in answer to Ruskin's criticism MacDonald wrote "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893), a prefatory essay for an American edition of "The Light Princess" and his *apologia* for the fairy tale. MacDonald argues that the fairy tale is a powerful mode of writing for both child and adult. Unlike Ruskin, MacDonald has complete trust in the child. Arguing that a fairy tale must have *vitality* and *truth* (abstract signifiers), he suggests that fairy tales work best when readers ac- [62] tivate them and make them personally concrete. In essence, he argues for a reader-response theory of the fairy tale: "Everyone . . . who feels the story will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another" (316). Anticipating a negative response to such an assertion, MacDonald admits that "it may be better that you should read your meaning into it" (316) because "a genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean" (317). Unlike Dickens and Ruskin, who view the fairy tale as a gentle guide to specific qualities of goodness—which includes beauty—MacDonald believes that the child, the reader, must engage the text and help create meaning. In that "space larger than imagination," the reader can write his or her own meaning on the basic framework of the fairy tale. Ruskin and Dickens seem to paint the child as a passive receiver of fairy tales; MacDonald sees the child as an active participant, filling such roles as Sleeping Beauty, Prince Charming, or the Wicked Witch.

Consequently, to MacDonald the fairy tale is impressionistic; it intends "to wake a meaning" (317), "to wake things up that are [within]" (319); it "seizes you and sweeps you away" (319). Not surprisingly, MacDonald equates the fairy tale to the sonata, to the aeolian harp, and to nature (all Romantic metaphors): "Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairytale to be" (320). Meaning, then, becomes secondary to the spirit that permeates the fairy tale and engages the reader, for meaning is mood, is feeling, is the sense that the fairy tale speaks personally to each reader. Eventually MacDonald makes his major claim about the fairy tale audience: "But indeed your children are not likely to trouble you about meaning. They find what they are capable of finding, and more would be too much. For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (317). The child is indeed the father of humankind. Thus MacDonald's concept of the fairy tale includes both child and adult: the fairy tale continues to influence the child and adult because each will engage the text according to

his or her individual need. [63] Jack Zipes argues that MacDonald “often turned the world upside-down and inside-out . . . to demonstrate that society as it existed was based on false and artificial values Fairy-tale writing itself becomes a means by which one can find the golden key for establishing harmony with the world—a Utopian world, to be sure, that opens our eyes to the ossification of a society blind to its own faults and injustices” (*Subversion* xxiii). In the hands of MacDonald, the fairy tale has profound moral and social clout, not because an adult could identify with apparent themes, nor because a child could find a concrete moral for guidance, but because the adult and child—the *childlike* in all—could immerse himself or herself in the once-upon-a-time land where all are equal, where all have potential, where anything is possible, and where all can stand on equal footing and help create meaning, help effect change. That Ruskin—and even Dickens—would value the fairy tale for its simplicity, for its nostalgic beauty, for its ability to simply exercise the imagination, instead of for its creative and social potential, clouds their insights into the powerful creative potential of the tales. Only George MacDonald, with his purer view of the childish imagination, could create unabashedly those haunting spaces larger than imagination.

Works Cited

- Brothers Grimm. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. Trans. Jack Zipes. Toronto: Bantam, 1987.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- Cott, Jonathan, ed. *Beyond the Looking Glass: Extraordinary Works of Fairy Tale and Fantasy*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1973.
- Dickens, Charles. “Frauds on the Fairies.” 1853. *Miscellaneous Papers*. Vol. 1. London: Chapman and Hall, 1911. 435-42.
- Hearn, Michael Patrick, ed. *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book* New York: Pantheon, 1988.
- Landow, George. “And the World Became Strange: Realms of Literary Fantasy.” *Fantastic Illustration and Design in Britain, 1850-1930*. Ed. Diana L. Johnson. Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1979. 28-43. [64]
- Lewis, C. S. *Allegory of Love*. London: Oxford UP, 1936.
- MacDonald, George. “The Fantastic Imagination.” *A Dish of Orts*. London: Edwin Dalton, 1908. 313-22.
- . *Lilith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981.
- MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. London: George Allen and

- Unwin, 1924.
- Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring, England: Lion, 1987.
- Rahn, Suzanne. "The Sources of Ruskin's *Golden River*." *Victorian Newsletter* 68 (Fall 1985): 1-9.
- Ruskin, John. "Fairy Land: Mrs. Allingham and Kate Greenaway." 1883. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Vol. 33. London: George Allen, 1905. 327-49.
- . "Fairy Stories." 1868. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Vol. 19. London: George Allen, 1905. 233-39.
- . "King of the Golden River." 1841. *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Vol 1. London: George Allen, 1903. 305-54.
- . *Praeterita*. 1885. Ed. E. T Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Vol. 35. London: George Allen, 1905.
- Stone, Harry. *Dickens and the Invisible World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979.
- Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. New York: Wildman, 1983.
- , ed. *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*. New York: Methuen, 1987. **[65]**