

Bruno Bettelheim and the Fairy Tales

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One of the most unforgettable things about the storyteller who spreads the marvelous tales which make up Rilke's *Stories of God* is that he believes his stories will better be understood by the children who hear them than by their elders who can only fear the dangers of straining the youngsters' minds with so much imaginative fantasy. The storyteller's favorite audience, though, is a certain cripple named Ewald, whose immobility has made him resemble things with which he fosters many intimacies, but whose familiarity with the art and grammar of silence has made him decidedly superior both to things and to changeable, talkative healthy people. It is Ewald's rare, quiet words and gentle, reverent feelings which the storyteller finds so appealing, in contrast to the crass incredulity of his other peers, who know so little about stories. On one particular day Ewald asks his friend, "Where did you get the story you told me last time?" Despondent, the storyteller has to recount how he found it in a book where the historians buried it some years ago after it had died a slow, painful death. It seems the story was inflicted with heavy words which became too difficult to speak, so that in the end it perished on one last pair of dry lips and was enshrouded with all honors in a book where others of its family lay. Before that, it had lived for four-or five-hundred years as a song, traveling freely from mouth to mouth, only pausing to sleep from time to time in some heart where it was warm and dark. After hearing all of this, Ewald asks, surprised, "But were people once so quiet that songs could sleep in their hearts?"¹

Rilke's point is well taken—even more so today than in 1899 when he first drafted his collection of stories. Oral folklore traditions in the past one hundred and fifty years have had to accommodate conditions which could only severely imperil their survival. As the highly industrialized societies race toward their apotheosis by means of increased professionalism, specialization, and the general institutionalization of knowledge, the art of storytelling is left behind, replaced by the newer arts of academic autopsy. Rilke's storyteller seems to have sensed that the printing press of itself was not enough to bring this about: it merely provided the most avail-

able graveyard for tales variously slaughtered by the forward rush of civilization. Like so many folk crafts whose means of production have been expropriated by technology, the folktale in most of its traditional genres has become a marketable commodity, ripped untimely from the socio-cultural setting in which it once flourished. And, to complete the process, what is left of the tales returns to contribute to the epidemic self-depreciation infecting the modern conscience. Children subjected to the biases of standardized schooling and mass modes of entertainment no longer want to be "told" stories that might depart from the "correct" versions printed in books or on film. And their educators, wary of offending the complex psychology of the child's development, learn to trust modernized editions of folktales, if indeed they tell them at all. The stories grow too heavy to be sung. They lose the right to roam about from mouth to mouth and be transformed each time they come to rest in a storyteller's heart.

The amazing thing in all of this is that so much of our traditional folklore maintains its natural enchantment over children and adults alike. The fairy tale is a case in point. However much we bowdlerize, mutilate, moralize, and otherwise bend it to our own ends, it still seems to move us with a power we have not yet learned to exorcise or imitate. That fact may well turn out to be more important than it at first seems. Like the hard-hearted King Shahryar, charmed for a thousand and one nights by the fantastic tales of the young Scheherazade, we may find in the end that our fairy tales contain much of the very wisdom necessary for our salvation.

It is precisely in this regard that a book like Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* is so welcome and so timely.² For those who know his earlier books and are familiar with his work at the University of Chicago's Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, Bettelheim's name has become synonymous with intelligent and devoted respect for the mysterious world of the child. In this latest book he carries on these same concerns by turning his attention to the function of the fairy tale in the development of the consciousness of the child. This is not the first time that Bettelheim has ventured beyond the psychologist's accustomed boundaries. Over twenty years ago he attempted a psychoanalytic study of puberty rites among preliterate cultures.³ The mixture of excitement and professional criticism which his theories aroused in that work has

no doubt prepared him for similar reactions to the conclusions he arrives at in this full-length study of the fairy tale. Fortunately, it has not deterred him from setting forth his point of view boldly and without compromise—a fact which is all the more to be admired in a man in his seventies, a patriarch among child psychologists who refuses to rest comfortably on his considerable achievements.

Bettelheim is not the first, of course, to apply the principles of psychoanalysis to the fairy tale. Freud himself had suggested in his *Traumdeutung* (1900) that there is an unbroken line to be found between the origins and functions of dreams and of folklore in the psyche; and many since him, from a wide range of psychological persuasions, have carried the suggestion further.⁴ But the study of folklore in the past fifty years has become so specialized and so vastly documented a discipline and the distrust of psychological methods so widespread among orthodox ethnologists that it has become exceedingly risky to continue on with such investigations.

On the other hand, we cannot forget the inevitable popular outrage still so easily incited by psychoanalytical ideas. Freud's interpretations of the polymorphous sexual perversity of the child is only beginning to settle into the modern mind, as Bettelheim himself, one of those who has done most to establish and refine the approach, must know only too well. Yet now we find him ordering such dear friends of imagination as Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Red Riding Hood, and Hansel and Gretel onto the analyst's couch—and the very idea sends a shudder down the spine in spite of ourselves. Surely this is the height of irreverence, the one sacrilege against memory for which psychoanalysis cannot be forgiven!

Indeed, left in the hands of a less sensitive observer of the human personality and a less skillful analyst, the worst might rightly be expected of such a project. Bettelheim's results however are impressive and generally hard to fault, given his stated intentions. Briefly put, the thesis he experiments with in the book is this: Using the psychoanalytic model of the psyche, fairy tales can be seen to communicate to the child an understanding of universal human problems in such a way as to encourage the development of his budding *ego*, give expression to *id* pressures, and suggest ways to relieve them in line with the requirements of the *superego*. The vagueness of the tales, he claims, is pedagogically suited to these tasks in that it engages the child's imagination to fill in the details

and to invest his interests on whatever level he finds himself. The message of the tales, the argument goes on, is most critical at puberty, when the tangle of emotions which grip the child is most in need of sorting out and naming; and when the "separation anxiety" is keenest and most in need of some promise of deliverance. And in all of this, Bettelheim concludes, the fairy tale is much more reliable and therapeutic than attempts to educate parents in the arid complexities of child psychology could ever hope to be.

Working within that broad framework, Bettelheim brings to bear years of clinical experience, considerable research into the fairy tale, and a sharp eye for double entendre to uncover the mechanisms and meanings of enchantment in the child. In the end, he may not remove all the offensiveness of a rigorously Freudian perspective, but he probably does more for the respectability of the fairy tale as an interpretative tool than has anyone before him.⁵ His awareness of the limitations of his approach, together with occasional references to concrete cases of childhood disorder, ably protect the extreme subtlety which marks his reading of several of the stories from the usual charge of one-sided dogmatism.

In short, Bettelheim succeeds in opening the tales up, in leading us in and out between the lines where they can be made to deliver of their healing secrets. It is not surprising that he directs his strongest criticisms against attempts to detour the fairy tales from their natural functions in favor of other secondary ends and so to close off their power and meaning. Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century moralization of the tales is the object of Bettelheim's most telling complaints. Disney's famous animations (frequently biased in favor of Perrault's versions) are only mentioned twice (pp. 210, 251) as instances of apologetic interference with the child's imaginative needs, although a general opposition to this treatment is unmistakable. All such closures remove the story from the genre of the folktale and relocate it amid the great bulk of so-called "children's literature" which he condemns as "empty-minded entertainment," shallow of substance and significance.⁶

By the same token, Bettelheim argues that book versions of the fairy tales, even if accurate, can be counterproductive. Most obviously, the use of collections of these tales to teach reading skills or a love of written literature seriously threatens their effect on the child. Moreover, the use of illustrations bereaves the child of the imaginative freedom he should enjoy, and makes identification with

the stories' heroes or heroines more difficult over a long period of time. Similarly, having the story read to one, or reading it oneself, tends to objectify it, to freeze its form and so to eliminate the essential contribution of the listener, who projects himself and significant others in his milieu into the tale. For Bettelheim, the ideal way to transmit the tales is in imitation of their folkloric means of communication: tell them orally and frequently; be faithful to the original without being slavish. Not only does such oral storytelling permit the greatest flexibility of response, but it sets up a valuable interpersonal event between the storyteller and the child. In addition, by separating the fairy tales from tacit interpretations—via the appendage of moral lessons, illustrations, or standardized wordings—their motifs may be taken over spontaneously by the child, Bettelheim suggests, to structure other forms of unconscious activity such as dreams, waking fantasies, and play.

Bettelheim's resistance to premature closure of the manifold of possible meanings contained in any given fairy tale is not simply a result of the same general interpretative principle which governs psychoanalysis' understanding of symptomatic languages. It has to do, he would insist, with the very genesis and structure of the tales themselves. He views the fairy tale as a corporate form of imagination which, so long as it meets the psychic needs of generation after generation of people who preserve it, will survive shifting patterns of reasoning and intellectual trends. Without denying this way of looking at the tales its validity, I think there are certain points in his argument where Bettelheim can be shown to have slipped into interpretative closures of his own which neither the fairy tales nor his own psychoanalytic perspective require. Accordingly, I turn now to a more critical examination of his project, focusing in the main on a number of general hermeneutical questions and adding a few specific remarks on selected tales by way of conclusion. Needless to say, these attempted disclosures will make best sense if read as marginal comments to the text itself and not as a complete substitute argument.⁷

In the course of constructing his argument for the meaning and importance of fairy tales, Bettelheim draws upon a number of assumptions about the psyche of the child. Perhaps the first to strike us is his characterization of childhood modes of thought as essentially similar to those of primitive, preliterate peoples. As the child develops, he learns to replace them with more adult modes of

thought which will enable him to live responsibly in our advanced civilization. Once one has understood the structure of this natural generation gap, Bettelheim would assert, it becomes clear that primitive forms of psychological insight—which is how he classifies the fairy tales—are more therapeutic for the child but unnecessary, even regressive, for the adult.⁸

Standing behind this conclusion is the old notion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that is that the development of an individual organism telescopes and repeats the evolution of the entire species. Its promotion in modern times is associated with the evolutionary biologist, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). From there it was taken up for experimentation in theoretical anthropology by Claude Lévy-Bruhl, among others, and eventually found its way into psychology through Freud and Jung. The hypothesis itself fell speedily into disrepute, roughly in the same order, though it is one of those suggestive and stubborn ideas which seem to survive even the strongest contrary evidence and to reappear at the most unexpected times.

Bettelheim's subscription to this principle, implicit though it be here, seems to me unfortunate.⁹ First of all, the claim that primitive logics are inferior to and irrational in comparison with scientific views of the world is unnecessary to the claim (which Bettelheim makes, following Piaget) that children begin in a largely animistic world and only slowly learn the art of abstract thinking. Moreover, it has the disadvantage that it intimates a qualitative difference between adult and childhood thinking; and, consistent with that, a depreciation of the role of imagination in abstract thought. Bettelheim comes close to stating this explicitly in passages scattered throughout the book such as: "Every child believes in magic, and he stops doing so when he grows up (with the exception of those who have been too disappointed in reality to be able to trust in its rewards)" (p. 118).

Second, by grounding the comparison of thought-patterns in children and primitive peoples merely on their equidistance from our supposedly unquestionable commonsense world, the possibility of further insight from a study of the social functions of thought-patterns, including those found in the fairy tale, is prematurely closed off.

Third, these two closures combine to encourage further the original bias that fairy tales are really prescientific forms of psychology

which are natural to the child's sphere but wholly unnatural to the adult's, which needs more rational means to integrate conscious and unconscious elements in the psyche. In this way, Bettelheim intends to support the usefulness of the fairy tale as a guide to the child's first halting steps in imagination. Yet it is hard to see how anything is gained in denying the tales any role at all in the mature imagination.

At this point the full and final implications of Bettelheim's attraction to the Haeckelian principle become clear. Personal maturity is measured, at least in great part, by one's ability to translate imaginative projections into the language of scientific psychology or some other rational interpretative frame. Enchantment is the necessary business of being a child. Becoming an adult, however, means extensive and deliberate disenchantment. What he calls the "illogic of the unconscious" continues to confront the "rational order" of the "real world" throughout one's life (p. 66). The difference between the integrated and the infantile personality is that the one can *understand* the objective truth about the real world, while the other can only *feel* it subjectively and so must revert to an unreal world. Each frame of reference has its own "truth," Bettelheim says, but there is no doubt that the truth of fantasy is more useful to the child's mind and harmful to the adult's (116ff).

There is a certain immediate appeal about such a point of view. For one thing, it seems to accord with our timeworn folk wisdom about raising children. For another, it supports our modern tendency to charge that wisdom more and more to the care of academic psychology, a tendency which Bettelheim seems to welcome readily enough. Parents are warned against trying to invent their own fairy tales to tell their children for fear of unwitting, but nonetheless dangerous, didactic interpretations. Only the rare individual—Goethe's mother is cited as an example (pp. 153-154)—should extend creativity in storytelling beyond the addition of occasional details. What every parent can do, on the other hand, is grasp the psychological meaning of the fairy tales, and this gives him a decided superiority over the child, which must not be relinquished for the good of both sides. He may never be able to capture the many-leveled meanings of a single one of the tales or understand the varieties of influence involved in its retelling from infancy to adolescence. But "even if a parent should guess correctly why his child has become involved emotionally with a given

tale, this is knowledge best kept to oneself." This because, Bettelheim argues, the child *wants* the meaning to be kept on a pre-conscious level. "Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys the story's enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child's not quite knowing why he is delighted by it. . . . He can gain much better solace from a fairy tale than he can from an effort to comfort him based on adult reasoning and viewpoints" (pp. 18 and 45).

The advice is sound enough, even if the intellectual hubris it appears to cultivate may not be. I stress the point here not in order to take issue at this time with the social function of psychological theory, but because there are hints in Bettelheim's own treatment that he himself is aware of the enchantment which psychoanalysis has over him, not unlike that of the tale for the child in terms of its power and fictions.

To begin with, he sees that the basic charm of the fairy tale is due more to its literary form than to its psychological message. "The fairy tale could not have its psychological impact on the child were it not first and foremost a work of art" (p. 12). He then goes a step further to assert that no other form of literature and art is so "fully comprehensible to the child" as is the fairy tale, by which he means that it is capable of yielding new insights at each return. For this reason he concludes that the exploration of the psychological contribution of these stories to the child's development is more useful to parents than other forms of interpretation might be.¹⁰ The questions which are closed off by *petitio principii*, and which could as easily have been left open, are obvious. Surely educators of all kinds would be interested in seeing a balance between the psychological interpretations of the stories and some investigation of the literary-artistic form which Bettelheim sees as essential. Furthermore, by separating the enchantment of the fairy tale from the world of child psychology, the possibility of its range of relevant meanings to the adult becomes once more deserving of attention.¹¹

Likewise, Bettelheim takes pause on one occasion to talk about the limits of his interpretation in such a way as to suggest the inexhaustible intelligibility of the fairy tale. "Today adults use such concepts as id, ego, superego, and ego-ideal to separate our internal experiences and get a better grasp on what they are all about. . . . When we consider the emotional connotations these abstract terms of psychoanalysis have for most people using them, then we

begin to see that these abstractions are not all that different from the personifications of the fairy tale" (p. 75). Except for one later remark about translating a story into "the pedestrian language of psychoanalysis" (p. 309), he does not return to the point. If we take the idea as given and add to it Bettelheim's acknowledgement that the fairy tales themselves are interpretations of inner human experiences—which is why they begin in concrete reality and pass into a magical, unreal world (pp. 25, 62)—then their "illogic" may be seen as a necessity and not simply as a pedagogic tool for the child who is unable to abstract. Just as the child "intuitively comprehends that although these stories are *unreal*, they are not *untrue*" (p. 73), so too the adult may need to see that the same is true about his psychoanalytic stories. The familiarity with the workings of the mind which characterizes the mature personality (p. 97) may appear more true if we use psychoanalytic categories. But as Bettelheim notes: "Unfortunately, in doing so we have lost something which is inherent in the fairy tale: the realization that these externalizations are fictions, useful for sorting out and comprehending mental processes" (p. 75). With respect to the general argument of the book, therefore, the tales may yet be useful for adults, even if only to remind us of the inevitable gap between the things of our lives and the talk we use to appropriate them into the story of our life.

One final indication that Bettelheim's commitment to the view that the fairy tale belongs principally to the child is not absolute is his frequent allusion to different "levels" of meaning in the tales. Most often he uses the phrase merely to refer to the child's ability to project different psychic states into the stories. He makes brief note of the strata left in the tales by virtue of their long oral history, embracing cultural, religious, and mythical elements, but dismisses it at once from consideration as of little use for our understanding of the child. In this way his closure of the fairy tales in favor of child psychology is supported by his evidence; but it neglects to keep open his own intuition of the benefits of deeper research into their archaeology, whether for his own project or as a way to extend the meaning and importance of the tales into the adult world as well.

We may now consider certain aspects of Bettelheim's interpretation which fall within the general compass of his Freudian standpoint. First among these is his use of the theory of projection;

that is, of the imaginative and largely unconscious transference of inner psychic states to artificial conditions which distort those states enough to provide a relaxation of anxiety. While such "externalization" is seen as necessary to relieve inner pressures—and at no time more necessary than during childhood—it is the very antithesis of maturation which requires the expansion of consciousness and the dissolution of projections. The benefit of fairy tales is that they prepare for mature consciousness in offering "figures onto which the child can externalize what goes on in his mind, in controllable ways. . . . Once this starts, the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos" (pp. 65-66). Bettelheim resists any attempt to specify which tales should be told at which time in the child's development, insisting that the way in which the tales teach by "indirection"—camouflaging feelings or displacing them onto secondary objects—can only be recognized but not organized for pedagogical purposes.

Although some theory of projection is essential for a psychological interpretation of the fairy tale, it is also likely to carry certain limiting biases with it. In Bettelheim's case, for instance, the concern with dissolving projections into their "real" components comes close to ignoring the need for criteria to determine what is real and what is not and overlooking the possibility that certain very real things of our life cannot but be spoken of in a language of apparent falsehoods, i.e. of projections. It is not necessary to get enmeshed in philosophical arguments about the mechanisms of perception to see these problems in Bettelheim's own method. On the one hand he allows the unavoidable projections of children and praises the fairy tales as helpful displacements of feelings too dangerous to be aimed at their direct referents (pp. 135, 164, 204). Adults do not need the tales for this, he says, but should remember enough of their own childhood not to deprive their children of them. On the other hand, he hints at possible uses of the stories as meditative devices for adults, only quickly to locate this function in a preliterate past where, according to his earlier assumption, men were more like the children of today in their modes of thought. "Like the patients of Hindu medicine men who were asked to contemplate a fairy tale to find a way out of the inner darkness which beclouded their minds, the child, too, should be given the opportunity to slowly make a fairy tale his own by bringing his own associations to and into it" (pp. 59 and 25). The possibility of drawing a continuous line between the child's mind and the methods of the

mystics, modern and ancient—Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.—is not only sidestepped but directly closed off by Bettelheim's use of the projection theory.¹²

In addition to infantilizing projection, he also tends to privatize it as simply a function of the individual psyche. That established patterns of projection are also used to transmit cultural values and views of the world cannot be dismissed out of hand simply because the individual is capable of casting his own fears and hopes into them. Bettelheim cites Eliade's interpretation of the tales as initiation rites by proxy (p. 35), but only focuses on the person being initiated, overlooking the social context whereby a story relocates an individual in the heroic ideals of a common past.

Finally, some mention should be made of Bettelheim's commitment to the universality and centrality of the Oedipus complex in childhood development. There is some indication that he recognizes how the application of Freud's idea to the subject matter of the fairy tales requires a common social structure based on a common definition of roles. "In the typical nuclear family setting, it is the father's duty to protect the child against the dangers of the outside world and also those that originate in the child's own asocial tendencies. The mother is to provide nurturing care and the general satisfaction of immediate bodily needs required for the child's survival" (p. 206). What we still want to know, or at least see questioned, is whether increasing control of once exclusively parental roles by service institutions might not make the tales so unreal a world as to be an ineffective source of projection for the contemporary child. Further, even if we were to accept with Bettelheim the universality of the Oedipus (or Electra) complex as the major psychic problem from age four until puberty (p. 39), we might still want to distinguish those times at which it is peripheral or negligible to the child's world from those when it is central. This would mean a reevaluation of his discovery of oedipal symbolism as sufficient for understanding the tales he considers. For it is very difficult not to eye with considerable distrust the generalized hermeneutic principle Bettelheim devises to interpret number-symbolism in the fairy tale: one=superego or dominant parent; two=the two parents; three=the child in relation to his parents (p. 106).

These closures brought about by the use of the projection theory point to four other assumptions which I do not believe the fairy tales share with Bettelheim's reading of them. Again, I state them

here not to present a detailed alternative, but simply to suggest that the tales may be more open-ended than we often give them credit for.

In the first place, the use of a "growth model" to characterize the unfolding of childhood into adulthood is not to be found in the fairy tales which Bettelheim treats. In addition to using Freud's well known states, he refers favorably to Erikson's epigenetic theory to describe the movement of the children through the tales. The difficulty with such models is that they require a notion of psychic betterment or progress according to some ideal, tacit or overt, of maturity. But the fairy tales seem to operate more simply, speaking only of some aspect or other of experience, some relationship, some insight which has yet to be appropriated by a particular character. The growth model, as Bettelheim uses it, stresses the ideal of a single ego which must gain mastery over the id, the superego and various ego-ideals, by "integrating" them, that is, by subduing them to its supremacy. "Complex as we all are—conflicted, ambivalent, full of contradictions—the human personality is indivisible" (p. 118). The fairy tales, in contrast, speak merely of individuals playing various roles, some of them surprisingly different, which give us an insight into their characters. There is no talk of a central unifying ego, and no assurance that the assumption need be made that each skin-bound individual can house only one personality. The goal of the character seems rather to be finding a place for each of the roles, as if the mature individual were more like a well-organized commune. The benefit of such a reading of the tales is not that it offers reliable criticism of traditional psychological models, but only that it appears to reflect the actual world of the fairy tales whose enchantment over us we have set out to understand.

Second, Bettelheim is ambiguous about male-female differentiation in the fairy tales. He believes that both boys and girls can identify with characters of both sexes in the stories. His lengthy comparison of the stories of "Oedipus the King" and "Snow White" illustrates this well. Elsewhere he claims that the motif of heroine marrying hero at the tales' conclusions in fact indicates the integration of "male and female principles" found in each personality (pp. 126 and 146), the male representing the coming to terms with the outer world, the female with the inner world.¹³ Like the apportionment of parental roles in the nuclear family referred to earlier, the symbolism depends on cultural convention, which

has proved highly volatile in industrialized societies. Bettelheim does not refer to this level of the problem, but skips over it to point to a mutual envy between the sexes seen on a biological level (p. 266). The only real evidence he draws from the tales themselves is their frequent use of neuter names, as for instance in the heroines of the Grimms' collection: *Das Dornröschen*, *Das Schneewitchen*, *Das Aschenputtel*, etc. (pp. 282-283). The idea of a counterbalance to a general male dominance in society by means of an exaggerated attention to female sexual mysteries, which seems a most promising one, is left untouched. In any case, Bettelheim's frequent reference to problems of female psychology reflects correctly the tales he is dealing with and needs an explanation not available within the limits of his chosen method.

A third problematic area has to do with the presence of morality in the fairy tales. While Bettelheim does not treat the stories as fables each with a specific moral—although he would surely have to admit that apologues and *Märchen* do occasionally overlap classifications—he does detect a certain moral world view which they all communicate. "A higher morality," he calls it, asserting that its unique trait is that good and evil are clearly polarized without ambivalence. This he finds helpful to the child who can thus identify without qualification with "good" characters in the stories and project his antipathies on "bad" characters. Where a fairy-tale character is involved in ethically questionable activity—stealing, murder, fornication, deception—the tales are treated by Bettelheim as "amoral" (pp. 9-10). The argument is unconvincing and contrived. It is, after all, not to our interpretation of good and evil that the tales must conform, but rather the reverse. I believe it can easily be shown that good and evil are not so well polarized as Bettelheim supposes. There are numerous cases, and I would even venture to call them the rule in his selection of tales, where good and evil change appearances, where good comes out of evil and vice-versa, and where individual heroes and heroines are curious mixtures of good and evil. Here again, the meaning of the tales may frustrate our pedagogical interests, but in so doing may also lead us to a deeper level of meaning if we are only willing to follow.

In the fourth place, we may note that Bettelheim encourages the child's projection into the fairy tales because in this way the happy ending will promote the hope that adjustment to the real world will offer great rewards, and the fear that maladjustment will bring disgrace. It is not, for him, a matter of false wish-fulfillment as it is an

appreciation of the need for wishes to be dramatized. "In the old days, when wishing still did some good . . ." opens the first story of the Grimms' collection. That "good" for Bettelheim is the promise of success which attends responsibility and perseverance. Wishing is then to be encouraged, but contextualized in reality. "Thus, a happy though ordinary existence is projected by fairy tales as the outcome of the trials and tribulations involved in the normal growing-up process" (p. 39). Once more, one wonders about this reading of the stories. The happy ending is not the universal element Bettelheim continually claims it to be. It is sometimes added abruptly, as a concluding device. And it is sometimes outright suspicious. The evident bias at work here is that the characters considered all do in fact mature and so are deserving of happiness. This in turn requires that we see happiness as the natural reward of virtue, a requirement which seems much closer to wishful thinking than to an acceptance of our real world. In the tales happiness is oftentimes given to the undeserving, the naive, or simply the lucky-starred. Bettelheim's argument may well capture the child's simplistic expectations about endings to fairy tales. But that children's interpretative projections in what he calls "true fairy tales" are always correct and always therapeutic is something that needs more critical attention than Bettelheim gives it.¹⁴

A psychological adaptation of the Haeckelian principle, the sharp separation of the worlds of fantasy and reality, and the full ramifications of his projection theory all circumscribe Bettelheim's analysis of the fairy tale as an aid to the child's natural process of development. The purpose of his method is to understand the effects of the tales and thereby to increase our insight into the mind of the child. If we begin, however, from the fairy tales themselves—even from those which he chooses for examination—and cast ourselves under their spell without any of these particular interests, a further level of meanings comes to light. Hints of this shadow-side to Bettelheim's treatment have come up in the course of our indication of those closures which seemed unnecessary to his overall project. It can now be portrayed more forthrightly, if in bold strokes, by way of introduction to some brief remarks on selected tales.

Bettelheim defines the generic difference of the fairy tale as the presence of magical or supernatural powers which come to the aid of the hero or heroine. I would argue that we need to go further

and assert that these powers are not merely *dei ex machina* which highlight the heroism of the protagonists of the tales, but ought themselves to be seen as the prime movers of the plots which underlie these stories. Unbiased identification with the adventures of most all the human characters of the tales, it seems to me, produces less often a sense of heroic strength in adversity than one of victimization, at first in adversity and then often in victory as well. To enter the world of the fairy tale is to enter a world ruled by dark forces, unknown and uncontrollable, alternatively helpful and hostile, which have their own rules and are singularly disrespectful of our efforts to manipulate our own success. In general, they surround such realities as birth, death, suffering, separation, ambition, strife, misunderstanding, and sexuality. Where the main character of a story is a child, these dark forces tend to focus in particular on the despotic superiority of parents, the heartless rivalry of siblings, the accursed onslaught of puberty, or the like. Naming these things as dark forces reminds us that we have here to do with the most universal and deeply felt questions of our nature. It does little to tell us how to answer these questions, other than to promote a simple trust that as these forces interact with one another on the stage of our lives, our own well-being will somehow be served in the end.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the function of the fairy tale would be to adapt the term "superstitious" to that end. Superstition is a relational term. It refers to a mode of thought or behavior which stands above (super-stare) and against the current psychological, philosophical, religious, and cultural modes of thought, giving expression to perceptions and needs ignored by other forms of the corporate imagination. Superstitions are not primitive modes of thought (even though we may find in old superstitions of many forms insights later taken up systematically by modern science), but a contrapuntal tradition. The benefit of folkloric forms of superstition is that they have been purified of many particular details of time and space, losing almost all synchronic unity but gaining in diachronic consistency as a picture of the dark side of consciousness. In general they are fragmented and form no total world view, though they may have once belonged to one. This was Hegel's opinion for instance, when he referred to folk superstitions and tales as "the sad and indigent remains of an attempted independence" of the national imagination.¹⁵

In contrast to Bettelheim's approach, such a view would not make the fairy tale strictly distinct in form and function from myth (pp. 26, 35ff, 199); nor would it focus on the heroic, self-salvific deeds of the protagonists as essential to a true tale (pp. 8, 9, 103f, 127f, 278). Most important, it would not require the restriction of the tales to children, which has been my most common complaint throughout the preceding analysis of Bettelheim's assumptions. This is not to say that many of the fairy tale characters are not easier for the child to identify with than for the adult and therefore of greater interest to the child psychologist, but only that the entire genre of the fairy tale need not be proscribed as pathological or immature for purposes of adult reflection.

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the disclosure of Bettelheim's method is by way of attention to specific details in the stories themselves. We may begin with the tale of "Rapunzel."

In his cursory and incomplete analysis of the story, Bettelheim sees its central motif as a young girl's achievement of independence from a domineering mother by the use of her own body (the golden tresses). The image of the overly protective mother seems clear enough in the transformation from mother to ogre; but that Rapunzel's freedom is secured, in addition to being ardently desired, is not so clear. The maiden's long hair was hardly her salvation. It was the very source of her imprisonment and of her downfall. It was the point of contact between her and her mother and also between her and the young prince, who mounted it to impregnate her on the spot—apparently with her full consent, even though they hardly knew one another and even though she had never before even seen a man! Rapunzel is punished for her sin by being exiled to a desert, where she gives birth to twins. The prince is blinded by the old woman and only happens on his lover some years later while roaming about the woods eating wild berries after having been exiled from his kingdom. The "happy ending" which Bettelheim draws attention to was not part of the original story set down by Jacob Grimm, but was a later addition of brother Wilhelm.¹⁶ In any case, it is too abrupt to belong to the flow of events in the tale. Like the mother who longs ardently to have a child (a request which God grants) and then longs to keep it (a request which is ultimately refused), Rapunzel and her prince are themselves the unwitting victims of strong desires. In time, all three are punished, not for their desire—which is natural and pre-

ethical—but for their blindness to its strength, for committing the original sin against human nature: the denial of consciousness. (Rapunzel, by the way, is named after the European bellflower, whose roots were known for its medicinal value as a cure to jaundice.) It is unlikely that a young child could appreciate much of this material in the tale, beyond some sense of the unfair restraint of the maiden in the tower of her parent's selfishness. Yet the message is there for the finding nonetheless.

In his treatment of "Sleeping Beauty," Bettelheim interprets the "curse" of the thirteenth wise woman fated to befall the young maiden in the fifteenth year of her age as symbolic of the arrival of puberty. Sexual awakening, and the isolation which accompanies it in the natural transition from childhood to adulthood, cannot be avoided, says the story, despite all the efforts made by parents to the contrary. Here Bettelheim comes close to abandoning his strict standpoint towards the "heroism" of the main character when he describes the central message with these words: "Don't worry and don't try to hurry things—when the time is ripe, the impossible problem will be solved, as if all by itself" (p. 233). But he avoids the temptation by insisting on the heroism of a "long, quiet concentration on oneself" as the meaning of the maiden's hundred-year sleep (p. 225). The end result is a transformation of perception which Bettelheim attributes to Sleeping Beauty's personal strength of character, but which the story seems to attribute merely to the passage of time: her world falls asleep and then awakens, finding her richly rewarded for the period of dormancy. Where Bettelheim does renege on his principles is when he notes that the curse turns out to be a "blessing in disguise" (p. 235), thus denying the absolute polarization of good and evil.

The weakest aspect of the analysis, however, may be referring the young child's fascination with the story to preconscious sexuality, a sort of presentiment of pubertal problems just around the corner. It seems more likely that the puberty motif—a common and universal human experience of falling prey to the dark forces of human nature—is being used as an instance of a more encompassing mystery. Even the possibility that Sleeping Beauty can become a model for all turning points in life where transformation requires isolation does not capture the full meaning. The message needs a more mythical and cosmic frame of reference. Something like: death and life are parts of one and the same reality, in whose

service they interact in the passage of time. Agriculturally, the image is that of the kiss of the warm spring sun enlivening the cold, sleeping winter earth. In the story's own context, the problem of life and death is introduced at the very outset. A king and a queen long for a child, as a way of insuring the continued life of the crown under their name after they die. And it ends with the statement that the maiden and her prince "live happily until their death." The curse of death by dark forces which marks the birth of the girl is changed into a promise of rebirth, just as the accursed thornbush forest (from which image she gets her original name, "Thorn Blossom") bursts into bloom sympathetically with the rebirth of the maiden. The overall feeling one is left with is that death is but a state of suspended animation. The tale does not argue the reality of life after death. It simply dramatizes the fundamental human desire for immortality.¹⁷ Hence, to read it purely in pubertal terms, or to assign it strictly to childhood problems, would seem a needless limitation on its meaning.

Bettelheim reserves his most extended analysis for the story of "Cinderella," and makes difficult reading of it by dealing simultaneously with a number of variants. This is perhaps the best example in the book of how he needs to overstep his own hermeneutic principle on the absolute polarization of good and evil. Far from seeing her as the wholly good and innocent object of others' derision which we typically see her as, Bettelheim shows how Cinderella is a pubescent young girl caught in the grip of a psychic condition which distorts her perception of her two sisters (sibling rivalry) and of her mother (who becomes like a stepmother and she herself like an unwanted orphan pining for the love of her "dead" mother). Oddly enough, he continues to maintain his position that it was her heroic deeds which saved her. In fact, she runs away from what she most wants (the prince at the ball), clings to a memory of past dependencies (weeping at the grave of her mother), and only yields to change when it is forced on her by magical forces (the birds who announce her presence to the prince). The evidence of the fairy tale itself is that it was dark forces which constellated the problem at home between her and the others in the family, dark forces which provided her with a temporary escape into fantasy, and dark forces which saved her. If anything, Cinderella was uncooperative and dangerously withdrawn, not traits we usually associate with heroism.

I find the most questionable part of Bettelheim's interpretation, however, in his reading of sexual significance into the slipping of Cinderella's foot into the golden slipper and the placing of the ring on her finger. There are sexual overtones to many images in the tales, to be sure. (Indeed, I could go further and point to the sexual symbolism in Cinderella's request for a hazel branch from her father, which she then plants on her mother's grave and ceremoniously waters with her tears until it blossoms into a magical tree fulfilling her every fantasy. The image of her desire that her father "be a man" in the home to save her from her unmerited ill fate, to give her everything she most desires with his magical hazel wand, is one of the most striking images in the Grimms' collection.) My criticism is rather that here, as elsewhere throughout his book, Bettelheim seems to confine sexual signification to *genital* signification, overlooking the more important functions of *phallic* signification. While there are instances in which an image can have both functions, the two should be kept distinct, since they point to distinct levels of meaning. As a genital symbol, the sexual image is a metonymic re-presentation disguised for purposes of good taste or even humor. The phallic symbol, however, is the metaphoric use of a sexual image to represent some deeper psychic reality.

Put in other words, the phallus represents desire—the impulse within which we can neither understand nor master in its entirety, but which is responsible for all human creativity. Desire is necessary (or "instinctual") and never satisfiable. It is premoral, chaotic, and far from always compatible with rational intentions; and for all these reasons, its repression is essential for effective social intercourse. To avoid such intellectual abstraction, the language of sexual metaphor is employed in the fairy tales, as in other mythical idioms. In this way, something is being said which is more than simply a statement about an emotional response to sexual factuality.

For his part, Bettelheim focuses rather on children's interest in genital symbols because of their preconscious sexual curiosity (pp. 128 and 220), and defends the use of symbolic representation over anatomical precision because it accords with the child's natural initial disgust with explicit talk of sexual realities and gradual discovery of their beauty (p. 279). Nowhere is this more clear than in the tale of "The Frog King" of which Bettelheim remarks: "Preconsciously the child connects the tacky, clammy sensations which

frogs (or toads) evoke in him with similar feelings he attaches to the sex organs. The frog's ability to blow itself out when excited arouses, again unconsciously, associations to the penis' erectability" (p. 290). The point is significant, but it may be more important to retrieve the function of the symbol as phallus—as representative of the inevitability and promise of a force which we neither like nor can control. The dark forces are not always pleasant and benevolent, but can be frightening and malicious in the extreme. We can only hope to understand them. (Here we might recall the image of the spirit Mercurius caught in the bottle, who is likened to "a frog jumping up and down.") In short, the genital symbol may be seen as an overtone nuancing a deeper symbolic function. Such possibilities escape Bettelheim's notice, once again, because of his method's limitations; but they are not therefore incompatible with his findings.

The recovery of silence necessary for the life of the fairy tale may seem to many, as it did to Ewald the cripple, a thing of the past. To have plunged deeply into Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* can only rekindle the hope that this is not so. There one finds oneself, as it were, on the inside of a magic lantern of images at once so familiar and so unexpectedly unfamiliar. It is hard to resurface without at least a spark of that *amor fatae* which made childhood so enchanting. The fairy tale has not outlived its purpose so long as we need reassurance that there is more to life than our usual heavy words can tell. It is a well-known bit of psychoanalytic folk wisdom that an analysis terminates only when the patient realizes it could go on forever. We could just as well say of the fairy tales: you have invested enough time and imagination in wrestling with their meaning only when you finally come to tell the stories yourself, just as they are, without embarrassment, and to allow them to sleep quietly in your heart.

NOTES

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Stories of God* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), pp. 47–48.
2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976). Selections of the text were published in the *New Yorker*, 51:42, 8 Dec. 1975, pp. 50–114.
3. Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds* (New York: Collier Books, 1954/1971).

4. The best account of the history of psychological approaches to the fairy tales which I know of was done by Paulo de Carvalho Neto, *Folklore and Psychoanalysis* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1972).

5. Bettelheim leaves no doubt about his acceptance of Freud's theory of the structures and development of the personality (*Love is Not Enough* [New York: Avon, 1950/1971], p. 49), although he has described how his personal experiences in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald led him to appreciate the limitations of psychoanalysis (*The Informed Heart* [The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960], chap. 1).

6. These criticisms remind one of John Ruskin's remarks of over a century ago, appended as an introduction to his 1868 selection of German folk tales designed "to appeal to young people rather than to adults." *The Complete Works of John Ruskin* (New York: T. B. Crowell, n.d.), Vol. 28, pp. 290-296.

7. Part of the wider context of my remarks was developed in a series of lectures delivered in Mexico City in the fall of 1975 and subsequently published as: *El cuento detrás del cuento: Un ensayo sobre psique y mito* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1976).

8. In an earlier book Bettelheim had claimed that as late as the seventeenth century the worlds of the child and the adult overlapped so considerably that fairy tales were the favorite literature of both (*The Children of the Dream* [London: Macmillan, 1969], pp. 53-54). The idea is not repeated in the present work, where he prefers the contrast of the primitive mind with that of the child. The influence of Andrew Lang's introductory essay to Margaret Hunt's 1884 English translation of the Grimms' tales, and in particular his comments on the "savage mind," seems to have been particularly formative in this shift of emphasis.

9. The point is made more explicitly, and defended as an argument *ad judicium* for which evidence is said to be lacking, in his earlier *Symbolic Wounds*, pp. 46ff.

10. The missing link in the argument, relating psychoanalysis to art, appears later: "The unconscious is the source of art; . . . the superego's ideas fashion it; . . . and it is the ego forces which enter into the creation of a work of art" (p. 109). In other words, the psychological message is more basic, after all, than the artistic form of the fairy tale.

11. The statement of Jacob Grimm, made in a letter to the folklorist Achim von Arnim, that the reading public he and his brother had in mind were "adults and serious people" is not to be taken lightly.

Jorge Luis Borges, whose success with simplicity of form and plot and fascination for metaphor is unexcelled among modern poets and storytellers, has done much to correct the bias that the fairy tale is the exclusive domain of the child's mind. To cite him in his own medium: "We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that appeals to the human imagination. . . . It is, so to speak, a necessary monster." Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), pp. 16-17.

12. In 1856 Wilhelm Grimm concluded a volume of annotations to the tales with the remark that the remnants of ancient belief are present in the

stories "like little pieces of a splintered jewel that lie on the ground covered by grass and flowers and only to be discovered by very sharp eyes. The meaning of the mystical element is long since lost, but it is still felt and gives the fairy tales their content while at the same time satisfying the natural pleasure in the miraculous. . . ." Cited in Murray Peppard's *Paths Through the Forest: A Biography of the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1971), p. 50.

In this regard, a better balance in a psychological approach to the tales is achieved by Julius Heuscher's *A Psychiatric Study of Fairy Tales* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1963). Bettelheim does not mention the book.

13. This was the basis of his earlier interpretation of male initiation rites in his *Symbolic Wounds*, pp. 19-20.

14. In the matter of morality in the tales, the strongest influence on Bettelheim's argument comes from J. R. R. Tolkien, whose own ventures into fantastic literature reveal such a morphology of good and evil as polar opposites, with evil being punished and good rewarded.

15. Georg Hegel, *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 147.

16. The story was taken by Jacob from a novelette by Friedrich Schulz, dated 1790; it was one of the few tales which they had not themselves heard narrated.

17. Bettelheim cites a particularly happy phrase of Tolkien's in this regard: "Fairy stories are plainly not primarily concerned with possibility but with desirability" (p. 117). The phrase recalls the position taken by the noted critic and essayist Richard le Gallienne: "Obviously nothing else is so attractive as the impossible; and the power of the fairy tale over the human mind is that, whatever form of the impossible you desire—it gives it to you." Richard le Gallienne, *Attitudes and Avowals* (New York: John Lane, 1910), p. 34.