UNMAKING PROGRESS: INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL TELEOLOGY

IN VICTORIAN CHILDREN’S FICTION

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This study contrasts four distinct discursive responses to (or even accidental remarks on) the Victorian concept of individual and/or social improvement, or progress, set forth by the preeminent social critics, writers, scientists, and historians of the nineteenth century, such as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Macaulay Matthew Arnold, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. This teleological ideal, perhaps the most prevalent ideology of the long nineteenth century, originates with the Protestant Christian ethic during and in the years following the Reformation, whereupon it combines with the Enlightenment notions of rational humanity’s boundless potential and Romanticism’s fierce individualism to create the Victorian doctrine of progress. My contention remains throughout that four nineteenth-century writers for children and adults subvert the doctrine of individual progress (which contributes to the progress of the race) by chipping away at its metaphysical and narratalogical roots. George MacDonald allows progress only on the condition of total selflessness, including the complete dissolution of one’s free will, but defers the hallmarks of making progress indefinitely, due to his apocalyptic Christian vision. Lewis Carroll ridicules the notion of progress by playing with our conceptions of linear time and simple causality, implying as he writes that perhaps there is nothing to progress toward, no actual telos on which to fix our sights. Oscar Wilde characterizes moral development as nothing short of self-inflicted cruelty, consigning his most scrupulously moral-minded characters to social subversion or untimely death (the dark reflection of MacDonald’s compulsory selflessness). And finally, Rudyard Kipling toys with historical substitutes for conventional progress, such as repetitive cycles, deviating from historical unidirectionality and linear development. He often realigns his characters with their intractable fates at the conclusions
of his narratives, echoing Carroll’s suggestion that perhaps our goals are delusional. I conclude
that while each individual author fails to holistically undermine the doctrine of progress, taken
collectively, these four fantasists represent a heretofore unexamined repudiation of the Victorian
era’s most enduring metaphysical conceits.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

   Progress’s Pedigree: The Victorian Obsession
   Evaluating Progress: The Epistemology of Improvement
   Taking Aim at Teleology: Four Perspectives on Progress

II. “GOOD IS ALWAYS COMING”: VOLITION AND DEFERRAL
   IN MACDONALD’S FANTASY ......................................................................................... 28

   “TOUCH NOT!”: Sublimated Volition and Deferred Realization in *Phantastes*
   “To grow to no end”: Interminable Progress as Virtue in the Fairy Tales
   “Following something”: Obedience v. Initiative in *Lilith*

III. GETTING NOWHERE FAST: PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT
   IN CARROLLIAN NARRATIVE ......................................................................................... 79

   Narrative Rabbit-Holes: Space and Time in Wonderland
   “Never Jam *To-day*”: Progress Postponed in Looking-Glass Country
   “Eerie” States: Character Disintegration and Development in *Sylvie and Bruno*
   “The Vanishing”: Futile Quests and the Annihilation of Meaning
      in *The Hunting of the Snark*

IV. DANGEROUS MORALS: PROGRESS AND HEGEMONY
   IN WILDE’S FAIRY TALES ............................................................................................. 135

   “I told him a story with a moral”: Moral Hegemony
      in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*
   Mirrors of Wisdom and Opinion: Morality as Self-Loathing
      in *A House of Pomegranates*

V. “ALL TIMES, IN ALL PLACES”: KIPLING AND THE NARRATIVE
   OF PERENNIALITY .......................................................................................................... 178

   “And so was England born!”: Destabilizing Historical Progress in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*
   “But otherwise I perceive no change”: Demythologizing the Past
      in *Rewards and Fairies*
   “I know not what I know!”: The Question of Development in *The Jungle Books*

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 233
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Unstained by wasteful deformities, by wasted tears or heart’s-blood of men, or any defacement of the Pit, noble fruitful Labour, growing ever nobler, will come forth,—the grand sole miracle of Man; whereby Man has risen from the low places of this Earth, very literally, into divine Heavens. Ploughers, Spinners, Builders; Prophets, Poets, Kings; Brindleys and Goethes; Odins and Arkwrights; all martyrs, and noble men, and gods are of one grand Host: immeasurable, marching ever forward since the Beginnings of the World.

— Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present

But for us,—who believe in right reason, in the duty and possibility of extricating and elevating our best self, in the progress of humanity toward perfection,—for us the framework of society, that theatre on which this august drama has to unroll itself, is sacred; and whoever administers it, and however we may seek to remove them from the tenure of administration, yet, while they administer, we steadily and with undivided heart support them in repressing anarchy and disorder; because without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection.

— Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy

Man needed one moral constitution to fit him for his original state; he needs another to fit him for his present state; and he has been, is, and will long continue to be, in process of adaptation. And the belief in human perfectibility merely amounts to the belief that, in virtue of this process, man will eventually become completely suited to his mode of life. Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. As surely as the tree becomes bulky when it stands alone, . . . so surely must the human faculties be moulded into complete fitness for the social state; so surely must evil and immorality disappear; so surely must man become perfect.

— Herbert Spencer, Social Statics, Abridged and Revised
“I should see the garden far better,” said Alice to herself, “if I could get to the top of that hill: and here’s a path that leads straight to it—at least, no, it doesn’t do that—” (after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners), “but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It’s more like a corkscrew than a path!”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

This study proposes the existence of a sustained, covert repudiation of the prominent social doctrine of progress, both individual betterment and historical amelioration, in the works of four well-known yet highly disparate authors of nineteenth-century British children’s fiction: George MacDonald, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, and Rudyard Kipling. These four writers, with the qualified exception of Carroll, have traditionally been critically evaluated in terms of their personal ideologies and/or contributions to generic reform in the field of children’s literature. However, even Carroll has been burdened with the synchronic distinction of ushering in the so-called “Golden Age” of British children’s literature with the publication of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865, and the critical emphasis on his work tends to foreground its role as the nonsensical antithesis to its earlier, more didactic counterparts.¹ In contrast to these more disciplinarily insular approaches, this study’s argument lends an unnerving philosophical gravity to the works of these authors, one which, taken collectively, transcends their relative positions in literary history and their admitted promulgations of specific political or religious ideologies. These four men use their writing for children to chip away at the very foundations of Western thought, to challenge one of its most fundamental ideas concerning the movement of individuals

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¹ See Gillian Avery, “Fairy Tales for Pleasure,” in *Nineteenth Century Children: Heroes and Heroines in English Children’s Stories, 1780-1900* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 121-137, 129: “1865—Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland comes within the decade of [Frederic Farrar’s] *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858), [Charles Kingsley’s] *The Water-Babies* (1863), and *Jessica’s First Prayer* [by ‘Hesba Stretton,’ pseudonym of Sarah Smith], but the pious, the moralistic, and the didactic are as much absent from its pages as if they had never existed at all in children’s literature.”
and societies through time. Utilizing various, occasionally hybridized forms of the fairy tale narrative, these writers dispute the verifiability of progress, each one arguing for the unreliable nature of one of progress’s means or standards of measurement, from ontological perception to individual volition, from morality to the structure of history. If, as Humphrey Carpenter writes, “all children’s books are about ideals,” these writers’ children’s books are about the systematic deconstruction of popular ideals, or more precisely, the untenable premises of ideality itself.

The choice of authors and works reflects my decision to highlight the singular qualities of the Victorian fairy tale, that paradoxical literary artifact that both administers the moral statutes of its age even while simultaneously undermining its own conventions and professed ideas.

Whereas the classic fairy tales of the European tradition—those iconic stories of Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen—tend to espouse and inculcate the dominant ideologies of their authors and respective cultural contexts with little deviation, the British fairy tales of the latter half of the nineteenth century frequently complicate their deceptively simple structures with conventional incompatibilities, precursors of modernism like unreliable authorities, cruel beauties, futile journeys, and unresolved conclusions. If, as Max Lüthi writes, “it is on the whole the goal of the fairytale to portray a world which, despite a few things being out of kilter, is largely in order,”

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2 See, for an example of the provenance of progress, Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *On Man in the Universe*, ed. Louise Ropes Loomis (New York: Walter J. Black, 1943), 85-243, 87-8: “Every art and every scientific inquiry, and similarly every action and purpose, may be said to aim at some good. Hence the good has been well defined as that at which all things aim. . . . If it is true that in the sphere of action there is some end which we wish for its own sake, and for the sake of which we wish everything else, and if we do not desire everything for the sake of something else (for, if that is so, the process will go on ad infinitum, and our desire will be idle and futile), clearly this end will be good and the supreme good. Does it not follow then that the knowledge of this good is of great importance for the conduct of life?” Interestingly, Aristotle anticipates one of the doctrine of progress’s signature flaws, its tendency to “desire everything for the sake of something else,” which, in the nineteenth-century, stems from the difficulty in agreeing upon a universal “good” (or from choosing an ambiguous “end” like the relative and probably illusory notion of “human perfection”).

3 See, for example, Jack Zipes, “Introduction,” *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (New York: Routledge, 1987), xiii-xxix, xxiv. Zipes points out the dual function of what he terms the “utopian” tales of the late nineteenth century, narratives that possess both “a moral direction” and “a profound belief in the power of the imagination . . . to question the value of existing social conditions”; “In the works of MacDonald, Carroll, Mary De Morgan, Juliana Horatia Ewing, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, Kenneth Grahame, Evelyn Sharp, and Laurence Housman the creation of fairy-tale worlds allows the writers to deal symbolically with social taboos and to suggest alternatives to common English practice, particularly in the spheres of child rearing and role-playing.”
then the Victorian fairy tale represents a decidedly new development in the history of the genre, one in which the world’s sense of “order” often gives way beneath an aggressive examination of its organizing principles, and where many things are put permanently “out of kilter.”¹ In particular, I have been purposeful in focusing on fairy tales as works of alleged children’s literature—I include the qualifier “alleged” because the authors themselves question the appropriateness of the classification—because of the subgenre’s unique ability to exploit its relatively rigid generic conventions for the purposes of first cultivating and then defying reader expectations.⁵ Such a narrative trick proves especially useful in contesting long-established hegemonies like the doctrine of progress, as it forces readers to disengage themselves from the predictable formulae of literary texts and thus from the various social forces those formulae throw into sharp relief. Additionally, with their virtually obligatory inclusion of allegorical characters and events, so often related in highly symbolic language, fairy tales provide a rich field for hermeneutical enterprise. Privileging as they almost always do what M. H. Abrams calls “the obvious or univocal reading,” fairy tales invariably conceal what Hillis Miller reimagines as the “equivocal” parasite, an idea or set of ideas embedded so deep within the reader’s

⁵ See George MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” in The Complete Fairy Tales, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher (New York: Penguin, 1999), 1-10, 7: “For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five.” See also Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the Pall Mall Gazette,” in The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 301-2, 302: “Now in building this House of Pomegranates I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public.” See also Rudyard Kipling, “The Very-Own House,” in Something of Myself, ed. Thomas Pinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 103-118, 111: “Yet, since the tales had to be read by children, before people realised that they were meant for grown-ups . . . I worked the material in three or four overlaid tints and textures, which might or might not reveal themselves according to the shifting light of sex, youth, and experience.” See also Humphrey Carpenter, “Alice and the Mockery of God,” in Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 44-69, 62. Although Carroll never specifically addresses the intended audience for his works, Carpenter and other critics have noted that the sophisticated allusions and abundance of advanced theology, theoretical mathematics, and logic hidden within his narratives imply a more adult readership than is sometimes assumed based on his relationship with the Liddell children: “And in any case, Alice is not (beyond a certain point) a children’s book at all, in the sense that it is not what it purports to be, the adventures of a child called Alice. The Alice figure is presented in the form of a child because it is required that this figure should ask innocent, unsophisticated questions of the persons encountered. She is certainly not a portrait of Alice Liddell . . . Alice is Everyman.”
“familiarity” that its biases and preconceptions go unnoticed and unchallenged: “Is not the obvious reading perhaps equivocal rather than univocal, most equivocal in its intimate familiarity and in its ability to have got itself taken for granted as ‘obvious’ and single-voiced?”⁶ As I read them, the stories these four men produced fall within the class of fairy tale that Gillian Avery characterizes as those which “turned back to the traditional fairy tale world, but made it even more romantic, beautiful, and distant than before, in order to contrast it with the prosaic reality of the ordinary world, and enchant the reader rather than amuse him.”⁷ These fairy tales do not attempt to reproduce “prosaic reality,” in either a reformist or a naturalist sense, but rather invite the reader to note the contrasts between the fantastic and the real, thereby exposing the often fantastic nature of ostensibly factual suppositions, like the existence of moral or historical progress.

As for this study’s focus on the works of four white, male, largely canonical writers, I can only defend such an increasingly unpopular demographic uniformity with the stipulation that the works of such writers are often regarded as critical faits accomplis, as settled matters no longer open to serious discussion, which often makes them fertile ground for assiduous analysis. Moreover, the popularity of these writers’ collected works can, ironically, dwarf the singular complexity or anomalous characteristics of some of their lesser known pieces, which is certainly the case with Carroll’s epic fantasy *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889-93) and Kipling’s historical *Puck* books (1906-10), for example. Additionally, these particular writers, again possibly excepting Carroll, produced a large volume of work for both children and adults. This artistic diversity often results in each of their creations being critically identified and evaluated in terms of the preponderance of thematic material extrapolated from their collected *oeuvres*, a process that

tends to either sublimate or emphasize their children’s fiction as correlative or anathematic to their other work. In other words, the children’s literature produced by these writers is rarely examined with an attempt at objectivity, but always already suffers from comparisons and juxtapositions with their numerous contributions to adult fiction. In Carroll’s case, the immense popularity of his *Alice* books eclipses and controls the discourse on his other work, and the long tradition of criticism focusing on the revolutionary nonsense of the *Alice* books, not to mention the critical preoccupation with Dodgson’s biography, may inhibit some potentially more fruitful academic investigations. Indeed, I have chosen these writers precisely for their familiarity among readers and critics, for in invoking four names so often yoked with Victorian studies in perfunctory, axiomatic ways, I am attempting to challenge what Raymond Williams calls “the dominative mood”—that “real barrier in the mind” that “project[s] our old images into the future,” dictating the parameters of both the interpretation of the canon and the presentation of history contained therein. Implicit in this selection lies a challenge to the idea of critical progress—or the accumulative model of academic discourse—in conjunction with the literary reevaluation of the progress of society and individual human beings.

In undertaking this study, I am proceeding from a number of critical assumptions about the function of literature in relation to social ideology, the most indispensible of which remains the inevitability of ideological content in what Fredric Jameson calls “the aesthetic act.”

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8 See, for one classic example, Stephen Prickett, “Consensus and Nonsense: Lear and Carroll,” in *Victorian Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 114-149, 146: “. . . Nonsense constituted an entire alternative aesthetic, making possible a radically different kind of art. In the attitudes of both Lear and Carroll . . . we can trace the emergence of this new form in the uneasy and ambiguous way in which they regarded their own creations: both decrying them, and simultaneously insisting that they be valued by others. . . . We see it the curious little sermons and homilies to children that so disfigure the last two Nonsense books of Carroll, *Bruno and Sylvie* and *Bruno and Sylvie Concluded* [sic].”


Indeed, if we are to take Jameson’s commission for analysts of fictional narrative as valid, we must concur with his assertion that “the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, no group of fairy tales operates outside of the ideologies of its historical location, and no team of contemporaneous writers unites to overcome the limitations of social convention. Rather, my contention implies only a partial ideological subversion on the part of each of these writers in relation to progress: for example, George MacDonald relies on the tenets of a quasi-Evangelical Christianity to set forth his destabilization of the individual will as a means to progress, and Oscar Wilde utilizes the precepts of a utopian socialism to undergird his dismissal of hegemonic morality as a path to individual betterment. Thus, none of these writers completely escapes the influence of his culture’s dominant ideas. Nevertheless, as I demonstrate, each does provide a critical reexamination of one of the nineteenth century’s most pervasive doctrines—the belief in a perpetual, essential process of individual and social improvement toward a dubious, socially determined goal like “perfection.” Additionally, the process of unearthing these writers’ reservations about an idea as fundamental to human existence as progress will inevitably help to illustrate the operative core of historical dialectics, revealing the deeply embedded ideological restraints that bind the readers of these tales in any given era like the prisoners in Plato’s allegorical cave. Once an observer is taught to see the projected shadows for what they are—mere representations of objects that melt and dissolve into one another instead of indisputable realities—he can begin to understand his position in the cave and reverse

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 20.
the complex and painfully dehumanizing process that Lukács calls “reification.”¹² Potentially, this examination will question progress’s privileged place in the pantheon of social ideologies, repositioning it within the field of inquiry instead of as the indisputable schema for all of human history.

Progress’s Pedigree: The Victorian Obsession

In his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869), one of England’s most revolutionary thinkers and champions of intellectual liberty summed up the teleology of his culture in an inadvertent epigram: “Any society which is not improving, is deteriorating: and the more so, the closer and more familiar it is.”¹³ Even as late as 1869, his statement would have been assumed incontrovertible by a large portion of his audience, among those of varying religious, political, and moral creeds.¹⁴ The “familiar,” the “now,” obsolesced with remarkable expediency in Victorian culture, and those who lived and worked in the England of the nineteenth century must have felt an immense pressure not only to adapt to the present, but also to anticipate and help

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¹² See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 83-110, 86: “The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created.” Furthermore, Lukács eventually echoes Marx in describing all objectifications of social interactions, as well as all fragmentations of society into classes or other hierarchical units, as forms of reification. As Jameson points out in his analysis of Northrop Frye’s theory of romance, such a definition will ultimately include the qualitative binaries of “good” and “evil,” ideologically rich objectifying labels that become almost fundamental to the moral teleology of progress.


¹⁴ See Jerome Buckley, “The Idea of Progress,” in *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 34-52, 36, 41. Buckley affirms the perserviveness of progress as social doctrine in the nineteenth century, suggesting its status as an (almost) unquestioned commonplace ideology by mid-century: “By the time of the Exhibition faith in a Macaulayan progress had engendered a confident complacency, which was to persist in some quarters, though more and more seriously challenged to the end of the century and beyond. . . . Such assertions, supported by the somewhat less emphatic avowals of Dr. Arnold, Mill, Morley, Kingsley, Huxley, and many others, reaffirmed the eighteenth-century idea of progress as a primary dogma of the Victorian period.”
facilitate the constant arrival of the future. These cultural pressures in turn gave rise to what
Andrew Miller calls “moral perfectionism,” a complex socio-psychological process in which
“the Victorians’ exhortative praise of ideal figures, so quickly cloying to subsequent sensibilities,
was in the service of a relation to oneself that followed from one’s relation to others and led to
one’s betterment.” According to Miller, this tendency to measure oneself and one’s “betterment”
by external standards, or “ideal figures,” began in England in earnest in the mid-eighteenth
century, a product of the Enlightenment estimations of the boundless reason of man and the
inherited self-recriminative practices of staunch Puritanism, and escalated during the British
nineteenth century, “a period and place in which the desire to improve was expressed with
revealing intensity and subjected to especially acute pressures.”¹⁵ Concurrently, the long
nineteenth century marked several changes in the conceptualization of history, the result of a
succession of historical philosophers like Kant, Carlyle, Hegel, Marx, Comte, and Spencer, all of
whom at least implicitly acknowledged the influence of “some immanent will” at work
“dictating the progressive direction” of the history of mankind.¹⁶

Additionally, the fields of science and economics contributed to the Victorian notion of
historical and individual progress. Lyell and Darwin opened a path to man’s prehistory by
extending the timeline of both the Earth and the Homo sapien back into the indefinite eons of the
past, which allowed for numerous panegyrics on how far the human race had come and equally
numerous speculations on the wonders it had yet to achieve. Crucially, these two theorists also
introduced into the popular imagination the notion of continuous change, of limitless, ongoing
modification. In accordance with the tenets of uniformitarianism, Lyell’s assessment of

¹⁵ Andrew H. Miller, The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature
History, Progress, and Decadence (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 14-33, 32.
formations that seemed to require cataclysmic causes under the old formulation of geological time not only indicates that the Earth is older than the biblical 6000 years, but it also suggests that the gradual transformations which led over millennia to the planet’s current topographical state will continue indefinitely into the future: “The same assemblage of general causes, [some geologists] conceive, may have been sufficient to produce . . . the endless diversity of effects, of which the shell of the earth has preserved the memorials, and, consistently with these principles, the recurrence of analogous changes is expected by them in time to come.”17 When combined with Darwin’s theories on evolution as a procession from lower to higher levels of complexity and perfection, Lyell’s substitution of a dynamic, interminably changing Earth for the static geological model that preceded it generated an almost cosmic validation for the doctrine of progress.18 As Gillian Beer states, the impact of evolution on modern culture, beginning in the nineteenth century, has been to justify a deterministic view of history, a perspective wherein “the idea of development makes it seem that all past has constantly aspired towards becoming our present.”19 Economic prosperity and the rapid augmentation of new, marketable technological commodities also assisted in lending to the Victorian era a sense of undeniable improvement in practically every area of private life, from home appliances to transportation.

19 Gillian Beer, “Introduction,” in Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 3-18, 18: “So despite its tendency to undermine, the evolutionary metaphor has become also a means of confirming our value, suggesting that we inherit the world at its pinnacle of development and are the bearers of a progressive future. The apparent historical determinism of evolutionary ideas loosely applied, moreover, tends to justify society as it now is, as a necessary phase in progress.”
Technological innovation dominated the nineteenth-century economy, with the introduction of passenger rail travel in 1833 and Talbot and Daguerre’s combined invention of the photographic technique, popularized during the 1840s, representing only a fraction of the total output to be seen during Victoria’s reign. And as Mary Poovey has suggested, the massive production of consumer products made possible by the manufacturing methods of the Industrial Revolution, when combined with the prolific generation of new science and technologies, resulted in the manifestation of what she calls “mass culture” for the people of Victorian Britain. This “mass culture” exists as an epistemological machine, comprised of persuasive images that determine the economic focus of an entire nation by convincing it of the absolute necessity of consuming its own commodities:

Thus mass culture, which is the historical outcome of the mid-nineteenth-century developments I’ll turn to in a moment, presents itself as a series of repetitions—individuals who assert their ‘individuality’ by consuming products that are ever more precisely differentiated yet always already the same . . . . As early as the 1860s, for example, members of the influential National Association for the Promotion of the Social Sciences represented Britain as a single culture, whose individual members could ‘better themselves’ by consuming the products their nation produced.\textsuperscript{20}

Here we can see the insidious connection between individual and social progress in its most materialistic expression. Because the nation’s economy relies on its citizens as a primary source of income, it presents the consumption of its goods as indispensible to self-improvement and fosters a sense of national identity to coerce further economic participation and political myopia.

from its people. Correlative to this burgeoning “mass culture” and concurrently emerging sense of national pride were the biographical “self-help” books by writers like Barbara Gates and Samuel Smiles, in which brief but laudatory outlines of famous scientists, industrialists, and inventors were offered as an incentive to personal improvement and as evidence of British ingenuity and racial superiority. These and other books like them also assisted in linking the idea of “self-culture” with the forward movement of the nation as a whole, for, as Smiles declares in the opening pages of his immensely popular *Self-Help* (1859), the two areas of progress are indelibly connected: “National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice.” Due to the emergence of “mass culture,” “self-culture” followed the same teleological course as did the nation, and the sentiments about the individual Briton’s vigor, pragmatism, and perseverance both informed and were derived from developing notions of national character.

Finally, in addition to the influence of scientific theory, technological advancement, economic acculturation, and hegemonic nationalism, the social philosophers of the nineteenth century contributed directly to the preeminence of the doctrine of progress. Beginning with the vituperative diatribes of Thomas Carlyle and continuing on through the aesthetic utopianism of William Morris, the prescriptive systems advanced by the dominant thinkers of the Victorian

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21 See Maria Frawley, “The Victorian Age, 1832-1901,” in *English Literature in Context*, ed. Paul Poplawski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 403-518, 420-1: “Whatever the differences in how scientific achievements of the period were recorded for posterity, scientific discovery and technological innovation were clearly a source of national pride—one linked, inevitably, with Britain’s evolving imperial identity.”


23 For the best etymological analysis of the word “culture” in Victorian parlance, see Raymond Williams, “Mill on Bentham and Coleridge,” in *Culture & Society*, 49-70, 62-3. Williams argues that whereas Coleridge viewed “culture” or “cultivation” to be a primarily social idea, it became under his usage “a higher court of appeal” than mere “civilization,” which came to mean the material progress of society in terms of wealth, health, and military might: “The social idea of Culture, now introduced into English thinking, meant that an idea had been formulated which expressed value in terms independent of ‘civilization’, and hence, in a period of radical change, in terms independent of the progress of society. The standard of perfection, of ‘the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity’, was now available, not merely to influence society, but to judge it.”
period were all more or less endued with the utopian impulse. As such, they all share one conspicuous trait: they insist on perpetual improvement as a metaphysical cornerstone, replacing Aristotle’s *telos* of “some good” with an endless process of reevaluative aspiration, in which mankind “desire[s] everything for the sake of something else.” Indeed, as Krishan Kumar posits, the Industrial Revolution contributed to a new conception of humanity’s potential, a liberating sense of limitless possibility fueled by the rapid political and economic influence Great Britain exercised during the height of its prosperity:

> The human essence was now defined by its very infinitude, its unboundedness—as unbounded as the Prometheus unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. Human nature was now seen to be in process of constant and continuous formation and growth, as protean and changeable as human society itself. . . . [Nineteenth-century utopias] had to accommodate the requirement for ceaseless innovation and growth, individual and social.

Hence, when Carlyle triumphantly attests to the immutable “Law of Being for a creature made of Time” as that eternal “phoenix fire-death, and new-birth” that leads forever towards “the Greater and the Better,” or when Leslie Stephen rails against David Hume for his mistaken analysis of

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24 See Ernst Bloch, “Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse,” in *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 233-287, 276. Bloch provides a metaphysical counterpart for the doctrine of progress in his espousal of perpetual and always already becoming “hope”: “And yet what is left for us here, we who suffer and are dark, is to hope far ahead. . . . *the dream-content of the human soul also posits itself, that it is correlated to a sphere of reality, however defined:* this is not only conceivable, meaning formally possible, but *simply necessary*, far removed from any formal or real examples, proofs, concessions, premises of its existence, postulated *a priori* in the nature of the thing, and therefore also having the *utopian*, intensive inclination of a precisely given, *essential* reality.” See also Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 163-66. Significantly, what Bloch here classifies as “hope” or “*the dream-content of the human soul,*” he elsewhere decries in the fairy tale as “wish-fulfilment,” that yearning after something better than the here and now that transcends the temporal limitations of its composition: “It all adds up to this: the fairy tale narrates a wish-fulfillment which is not bound by its own time and the apparel of its contents. . . . The fairy-tale hero is called upon to overcome our miserable situation, regretfully just in mere fairy tales.”

25 See note 2 above.

morality on the grounds that it “failed to make allowance for the slow evolution of new social and intellectual conditions” or describes the history of philosophy as “the gradual emancipation of the mind from the errors spontaneously generated by its first childlike attempts at speculation,” they are both invoking the utopian impulse of interminable perfectibility. In addition to Carlyle and Stephen, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold—two of the most widely-read social critics of the century—added their voices to the championing of progress in *A System of Logic* (1843) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), respectively. Although not often grouped with the acolytes of progress, Mill nevertheless reveals his active decision to view the trajectory of human history as one of gradual amelioration: “It is my belief that the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement—a tendency towards a better and happier state.” And Arnold repeatedly affirms his faith in what he terms “true human perfection,” a holistic teleology of intellectual enhancement brought about slowly through the constant tutelage of culture and its erudite proponents: “Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us . . . to conceive of true human perfection as a harmonious perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a general perfection, developing all parts of our society.” Thus, one could accurately describe the doctrine of progress as one of the most salient, dominant, and pervasive ideologies of nineteenth-century Britain, extending as it does to virtually every mode of thought in public discourse. As such, it should come as no surprise that Victorian literature often reflects its influence, whether in the motivations and expectations of its major characters, or in the heuristic structure of its *bildungsroman* plots. Somewhat more surprising, however, is the existence of an active rebuttal of the doctrine of progress at the most

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fundamental level by some of the culture’s leading writers, who, unexpectedly, offer their most aggressive analysis of progress’s viability in works of children’s fantasy.

Evaluating Progress: The Epistemology of Improvement

As a social phenomenon, progress crosses the annals of human history as an abstract notion, an organizing model for the affairs of humanity that both lends an existential purpose and opens a path to the comparative analysis of historical eras or epochs. As such, the process of assessing a people’s progress tends to involve the occasionally absurd juxtaposition of disparate civilizations and an equally dubious comparison between their intellectual, economic, or military accomplishments. Typically, the methods that appear to be more complex to the modern observer acquire an ascendancy over those that rely on superstition, excessive physical labor, or brute force, and this occurs because the modern observer lives in a world dominated by an inaccessibly byzantine economic system or sophisticated technology. The result of this chronological bigotry is an appeal to progress, an often implicit assumption that because things are more complex in the present, or because they allegedly clarify a disputed question, or because they save an individual time or provide convenience, they are therefore an improvement on the methods of the past, which consequently devolves into a primitive, barbaric wasteland.30

The assumption of progress can be so endemic to human thought about history, both personal and universal, that even the most disciplined analyst succumbs to its ideological sway.

30 See Robert A. Nisbet, “The Comparative Method,” in Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 189-208, 190-1. Nisbet describes this prejudiced, tautological method of historical comparison as “a shoring-up of the idea of progressive development generally and, more particularly, of the belief that the recent history of the West could be taken as evidence of the direction in which mankind as a whole would move and, flowing from this, should move.” In other words, the method described—one employed vigorously in nineteenth-century scholarship—assumes progress as a foregone conclusion, even while it professes to demonstrate continuous improvement as historical law: “... for fundamental to the Comparative Method and its assumed validity as a body of evidence are the very preconceptions—conclusions, too, actually—of the theory of social evolution that the Comparative Method purportedly verifies.”
For example, in a passage from J. S. Mill’s *A System of Logic* that precedes the one quoted above by a few sentences, Mill writes, “The words Progress and Progressiveness, are not here to be understood as synonymous with improvement and tendency to improvement. It is conceivable that the laws of human nature might determine, and even necessitate, a certain series of changes in man and society, which might not in every case, or which might not on the whole, be improvements.” So far, Mill has avoided the pitfall of making progress-as-improvement the rubric for history. However, in the very next line, Mill paradoxically affirms “a general tendency of . . . improvement; a tendency toward a better and happier state” in the successive generations of humanity.  

Mill goes on to confess that while he cannot agree with the “French school” of positivist philosophers who believe progress to be a “law of nature,” he can conceive of progress as “an empirical law,” that is, one verifiable through empirical observation.  

In response to this argument for the self-evident status of progress, Fredric Jameson has posited that “the ‘idea’ of progress” may be symptomatic of something more latent in human thinking about history, “some vaster pensée sauvage about history itself, whether personal or collective,” and he cautions against exempting it from the classification of “narrative,” suggesting that its viability rests in nothing firmer than those “master-fantasies” of the “mythical, archetypal, and [psychologically] projective” variety. There is nothing to suggest, Jameson implies, that social narratives like the idea of progress are inherently more viable than myth or archetype, or that they can in fact be “tested for their objective or even scientific validity.”  

Indeed, one of the basic purposes of the following chapters is to investigate this very premise, namely, whether or not one can in fact measure progress, albeit the criteria used for

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measurement here transcend those available to sense perception alone. Rather, I focus on four principles of ontological significance—volition, perception, morality, and history, each of which corresponds to one of the four authors who comprise the study—in order to examine the critical presentation of progress in Victorian narrative. My contention is that these four principles can and have been used as either means toward achieving or conventional benchmarks for assessing individual and social progress, yet each of these writers proceeds to question and / or limit the effectiveness of one of these principles in his narratives, which in turn limits the progress of the characters therein. As is the case in Carroll’s books, the figure of progress sometimes remains metaphorical, assuming a basely physical or corporeal appearance in the narrative—Alice and others have constant trouble actually moving forward in Wonderland, for example—while in other texts progress assumes a more metaphysical significance, as in MacDonald’s fantasies, where it represents an acquiescence to God’s will. Additionally, my examination of progress will not be limited to the thematic content of the texts I have chosen for analysis; I will also occasionally investigate the “progressive” or “antiprogressive” narrative structure of the stories and novels of these four Victorian writers. For example, Kipling utilizes a cycle of revelation, dismissal, and reiteration in the narrative succession of episodic stories in Puck of Pook’s Hill and Rewards and Fairies that mirrors the cyclical view of history conveyed by their content. Wherever germane, I include a discussion on narrative form to supplement my assertions about the destabilization of the doctrine of progress found within the discourse of the text.34

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34 See Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, “Ideology,” in The Cambridge Companion to Narrative, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 217-230, 220, 223. Herman and Vervaeck outline the structuralist analytical dichotomy of the fabula and syuzhet, as developed by Vladimir Propp and others in the early work of Russian Formalism (though they split their own analytical hierarchy into three levels: story, narrative, and narration), and they suggest that ideological content can be found on all levels of any narrative, that is, within the story and its manner of representation and organization: “The structuralists call the most abstract level of a narrative the story or fabula. It consists of three basic story-elements: actions or events; actants (roles performed by characters); and setting in time and space. . . . This model splits up roles into clearly delineated unities and therefore has its own ideological leanings, but it also enables the narratologist to see the ideological workings of a story. . . .
Taking Aim at Teleology: Four Perspectives on Progress

In the first chapter of this study, I provide a close reading of the fantasy narratives of George MacDonald in an attempt to demonstrate what I have termed “the subjugation of volition” and its effects on the presentation of progress. MacDonald’s narratives exhibit a hesitancy to provide an ultimate resolution to the quests of self-development their characters experience, and the result of this deferred anagnorisis is an abandonment of the individual will and a perpetuality of improvement without hope of consummation. As such, MacDonald’s characters must relinquish the freedom of their wills in exchange for cryptic knowledge about ephemeral, future redemption, typically allusive to the second coming of Christ. Thus, MacDonald proposes an eventual perfection of humanity via the divine intervention of an external authority, but he resoundingly denounces the individual’s ability to initiate or maintain personal progress through the vehicle of his own willpower. Progress, in MacDonald’s works, is humble expectancy, and in accordance with this ideology, many of his characters spend their time moving about in endless dream-states or merely staying asleep. Whatever movement they are allowed remains meaningless until they abandon any sense of self-control or willed action and accept the impetus of an invisible force on their every decision. Conspicuously, such an ideology stands in stark contrast with the dominant social philosophies of MacDonald’s day, expressed in such seminal works as Mill’s On Liberty, Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843), or Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy, all of which touted the indispensible exigency of work, action, and the will to better oneself and all of collective humanity.35 Remarkably, MacDonald’s Narrative, the second level in structuralist analysis, is more concrete than the story. It concerns the actual way in which events and characters are presented. This involves three dimensions, namely temporal organization, characterization, and focalization. These three aspects . . . are more explicit carriers of ideology than the aspects of the story level . . . .”

35 See Walter E. Houghton, “Earnestness,” in The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 218-262, 250: “Moreover the idea of progress, though often limited to material advance,
fantasies provide no attainable progress for the individual pilgrim or for the larger community, as their plots terminate abruptly in ambiguity with the main characters avowing only an ineffable change in their outlook that remains clouded by their professed confusion over the significance of the events they have witnessed.

Based on an in-depth reading of MacDonald’s career-framing fantasy novels, *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), as well as a limited sampling of his fairy tales, I contend that MacDonald’s Christian mysticism permeates his books with an indecipherability that cultivates their deferred resolutions. Because MacDonald wishes his fiction to “move by suggestion, to cause to imagine,” he denigrates explanation in his narratives, causing his characters (and his readers) to forsake any willful interpretation of the highly symbolic environment in which they find themselves and to simply trust in an eventual “wake[ning]” of meaning. 

MacDonald’s stories teach lessons of patience and faith without an object or the capability of self-evaluation. Due to their wholesale dismissal of the viability of self-motivated improvement, these narratives repeatedly deny their characters success in their own initiatives until they reach a point of abject hopelessness—the main character in *Phantastes* tries to kill himself, while the eponymous antagonist in *Lilith* begs for death—whereupon the unseen powers at work in MacDonald’s allegorical Fairy Land assume control and compel them ever onward toward some unknown and unknowable end. On the page, this translates into forced movement and deferred explanation, even unto the terminal chapters of the books—one of which concludes with the aptly titled “Endless Ending.” Thus, MacDonald strips the doctrine of progress of one of its primary tenets.

had a wider meaning, as we know, and one which gave all men, not just industrial leaders and workers, a high sense of mission: to take part in the great march and struggle of mankind up from barbarism to civilization.”

36 See George MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” 7-10. MacDonald affirms the purpose of his fiction to be “to wake a meaning” rather than “to convey a meaning.”

37 See George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 15. During an early conversation with a woman of the wood, the book’s main character Anodos learns about the unseen powers when the woman explains that no one enters Fairy Land without a purpose “either known to himself or to those who have charge of him.”
the power of the individual to achieve his own “betterment” through determination, cleverness, and hard work. Instead, MacDonald’s progress looks more like its opposite, for only the childlike, ascetic penitent can accomplish any sort of improvement in his narratives, though what exactly constitutes that improvement and toward what end it tends are questions without answers in MacDonald’s enigmatic journeys to nowhere.

In the second chapter of this study I provide a thorough examination of Lewis Carroll’s two *Alice* books, as well as his lesser-known works *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), in order to illustrate his complex subversion of the capacity to perceive progress. Unlike MacDonald, Carroll acts not the part of the Evangelist in his prose, however indeterminate the gospel, but rather assumes a philosophical position nearer to nihilism. Carroll’s famous heroine moves constantly through the labyrinthine paths of Wonderland, but never gets any nearer to the goal she perceives, a telos that almost always turns out to be either nothing at all or something quite the opposite from what she expects. Additionally, she often moves frantically only to remain in one place or to circle back on a previous path, indicating that her ability to gauge her progress is severely limited by an ontological breakdown in the laws of time and space. Indeed, as I argue, Carroll implements a “homogenization of time and space,” whereby all locations are indistinguishable from each other and all time is negotiable or relative to its observer. Due to this conceptual reorganization, Alice experiences progress in its most basic etymological sense only, as simple movement divorced from the idea of development or

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38 See, for example, Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 10, 62. The “loveliest garden you ever saw” that Alice glimpses through the little door near the outset of her adventures and that becomes her primary aim in the story turns out to be the painted rose-garden and croquet grounds of the violent Queen of Hearts in Chapter VIII. See also 192-204. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice’s main goal is to become a Queen in the Final Square of the haphazard chess game she plays throughout the book, but when she achieves her goal, she discovers that being Queen actually diminishes her power in Looking-Glass Country rather than giving her any authority over its inhabitants.
improvement. Moreover, Carroll disrupts her (and the reader’s) ability to track even her physical progress through Wonderland and the Looking-Glass Country, as is the case in the sheep’s protean shop in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), where objects recede as Alice approaches and the environment continuously metamorphoses around her. Thus, Carroll’s *Alice* books question the doctrine of progress at the most fundamental level by throwing the very means by which we perceive our movement through space and time into doubt.

Another conspicuous aspect of Carroll’s deconstruction of progress is his presentation of all prior information and experience as futile in interpreting current occurrences or in predicting future outcomes. In other words, intellectual or moral development cannot exist in Wonderland or the Looking-Glass Country, where the standards of behavior and even the rules of existence fluctuate like the Mad Hatter’s notion of time and where one moment’s immutable prohibition is the next moment’s absolute requirement. Through a focused reading of excerpts from Carroll’s diaries and letters, I demonstrate the related paradox of the author’s almost Buddhist envisioning of life as an inconsequential dream-state that jars against his virtually compulsive insistence on vigorous self-improvement—a paradox echoed in the pages of the *Alice* books. In my analysis of the narratologically experimental, highly allusive *Sylvie and Bruno* books, I exemplify how Carroll uses unorthodox structural techniques (like phasing between two separate narrative threads without the use of textual cues like chapter, page, or even line breaks) to problematize plot and character development and to thwart reader comprehension and expectation, which serves to undermine the narrative progress of his fiction. Additionally, and as an ironic complement to the books’ structural subversion of narrative progress, Carroll infuses his *Sylvie and Bruno* books, ostensibly intended for an audience of children, with sophisticated cultural

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39 The *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes the English word “progress” to the Latin “progressus,” meaning simply an advance or march, which could be extended to include abstract concepts like time or historical events, but which was most often applied to forward movement toward a destination.
allusions and philosophical dialogues, many of which ridicule traditional Victorian views on the
doctrine of progress—in one such passage, Carroll’s characters mock Herbert Spencer’s famous
definition of evolution as “a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite,
coherent heterogeneity” with the clever substitute, “a process of involution, passing from definite
coherent homogeneity to indefinite incoherent heterogeneity.” I also briefly examine Carroll’s
poem The Hunting of the Snark (1876), which I suggest contains a concise object lesson on the
dangers inherent in “the Pursuit of Happiness,” or utopian progressivism. The nonsensical
ballad also displays some further characteristics of Carroll’s anti-progressive narrative
disintegration of meaning and character development, as its primary character, the Baker,
actually fades into literal nothingness by the poem’s end, just as the Bellman’s crew’s mission
loses its purpose with “the Vanishing” of its telos, the “Boojum” Snark.

The third chapter of this study centers on the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde, published in two
volumes, The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888) and A House of Pomegranates (1891). As
do countless other pieces in Wilde’s body of work, the stories in these collections reflect an
almost vitriolic antipathy toward conventional morality, and as such, they present the Victorian

Spencer amended his oft-quoted definition in subsequent editions of his book, but in the 1865 edition the definition
reads as follows: “Evolution is a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent
heterogeneity; through continuous differentiations and integrations.” See also Lewis Carroll, “Sylvie and Bruno,” in
The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 1996), 239-448, 381.
41 See Lewis Carroll, The Letters of Lewis Carroll, ed. Morton N. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press,
1979), 2:1113. See also Robert Nisbet, “Progress as Power,” in History of the Idea of Progress (New York: Basic
Books, 1980), 237-296, 239. Echoing Leszek Kolakowski’s definition of utopianism, Nisbet argues that the utopian
theorists of the nineteenth century—Marx, Saint-Simon, Comte, Owen, Morris, and many others—were just as
invested with an unabashed faith in progress as their more conservative counterparts. He insists that their aggressive
pursuit of absolute social, and consequently individual, perfection reveals a dauntless belief in the “advance
ment of mankind”: “Saint-Simon, Comte, Marx, and other utopians were apocalyptic and millenarian indeed. . . .
But nowhere in the nineteenth century are there to be found more devoted and influential expositors of theories of
progress, of the stage-by-stage, inexorable, and necessary advancement of mankind from past to future. . . .
Utopianism at its most influential is, then, an expression of both power and faith in progress.”
1962), 11-34, 23: “This is the great search motif of the poem, the quest for an ultimate good. But this motif is
submerged in a stronger motif, the dread, the agonizing dread, of ultimate failure. . . . [Carroll’s Boojum] is the void,
the great blank emptiness out of which we miraculously emerged; by which we will ultimately be devoured; through
which the absurd galaxies spiral and drift on their nonsense voyages from nowhere to nowhere.”
sanctioning of moral improvement in accordance with those conventions as an impediment to individual development, or what Wilde terms “Individualism.” In direct contrast to George MacDonald, Wilde insists on the total autonomy of the individual, unrestrained by social authority, as indispensable to progress. Thus, whereas MacDonald would exchange the desires of the individual for an eternally deferred redemption for everyone, Wilde would subsume the moral demands of society beneath the primacy of individual development. For Wilde, progress means the constant deconstruction of social hegemony, or as he puts it, “disobedience”:

“Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.”

So while Wilde remains an adamant believer in the idea of progress, specifically in its operation within the individual personality, he nevertheless denounces moral improvement as a means to achieving that progress, which places him in direct opposition to most of the proponents of progress in nineteenth-century England. However, instead of depicting an idealized, quasi-allegorical alternative to the flawed social doctrine of progress in his work or ruthlessly ridiculing the notion as absurd, as did MacDonald and Carroll, Wilde chooses to “mirror modern life in a form remote from reality,” to portray the often fatal results of conforming to the

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45 See Andrew Miller, The Burdens of Perfection, 2. As Miller affirms, the most typical form for the idea of progress to take in nineteenth-century thought was as a variation on “betterment,” which almost always involved a component of moral improvement based on the emulation of “exemplars”: “And the most coherently developed, broadly resonant, and philosophically engaging expression of [the desire to improve] . . . was what philosophers call ‘moral perfectionism.’ Estote ergo vos perfecti!: ‘Be ye therefore perfect!’ (Matt. 5:48) was the stern epigraph of Matthew Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy, the most famous of such explicitly perfectionist texts. . . . As I conceive it, this moral perfectionism is a particular narrative form (rather than a concept, theory, or disposition) capable of great variation and extension. At its heart is the complex proposition that we turn from our ordinary lives, realize an ideal self, and perfect what is distinctly human in us—and that we do so in response to exemplary others.” It is precisely this final aspect that Wilde found irreconcilable with his philosophy of Individualism: no standard external to the innate individuality of each person should be allowed dominion over his development toward perfection.
standards of conventional morality instead of fostering the growth of one’s personality. As such, his fairy tales are narratives of death and disfigurement, in which his typically beautiful or artistically talented protagonists forsake their individuality in the attempt to morally “better” themselves.

Informed by Wilde’s premise that Victorian philanthropy constitutes an act of moral hypocrisy—as a meager half-measure more intended to alleviate the philanthropist’s guilt than significantly alter the conditions of the poor—this chapter approaches the majority of Wilde’s fairy tales in an effort to highlight their often subtle but nonetheless scathing satire of the sentimental, didactic literary tradition they draw on for their characters, language, and basic plot structure. Wilde utilizes the narrative triptych, the redemptive quest, physical transformation, and a number of other stock-in-trade fairy tale conventions to construct his seditious tales, but the characters who adopt the external standard of imposed morality invariably lose their identities or die, often without having made the smallest difference in the lives of others and having denied their own maturation in the process. Far from enacting an uncharacteristic moral agenda, Wilde conceives his fairy tales as engines of dissent among the ranks of the converted, employing the tools of social ideologues like Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen to demonstrate the superficiality and potentially stunting effects of moral hegemony.

The fourth and final chapter of this study focuses on three story collections by Rudyard Kipling that span the fin de siècle, bringing the debate over progress out of the High Victorian period and into the era of Empire. Out of Kipling’s vast body of work, The Jungle Books (1894-95), Puck of Pook’s Hill (1906), and Rewards and Fairies (1910) all fall loosely within the

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47 See Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 1081: “We are often told that the poor are grateful for charity. Some of them are, no doubt, but the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. They are quite right to be so. Charity they feel to be a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives.”
category of Victorian fairy tale literature, as they contain talking beasts, temporal and spatial
disruption, and an actual British fairy, one of the “People of the Hills,” in Puck, who serves as
master of ceremonies during the cavalcade of historical characters who appear in the latter two
books. Moreover, in accordance with the previous chapters, I argue that Kipling uses these texts
to problematize the ameliorative unidirectionalism at the heart of the doctrine of progress.\textsuperscript{48}
These collections consistently present both personal and cultural history, not as an unbroken line
of triumphant progression from provincial, ancient man to cosmopolitan, modern citizen of
empire, but as an inviolate cycle, an oscillation between social construction and dereliction with
conspicuously repeating patterns in which the forces of mere accident and inescapable human
tendencies, like folly, self-interest, pride, and ignorance, govern the almost chaotic succession of
events. Contrary to the critical estimation of Kipling as an ideologically myopic champion of
imperialism and British global ascendancy, the stories in these collections reveal the author’s
serious doubts about England’s place as the ostensible vanguard of history. Particularly in the
\textit{Puck} books, in which two British children learn the history of their country in transient
installments from the last and oldest of the fairies, history assumes an amorphous, almost dream-
like quality: characters from the past appear and disappear, relating their esoteric narratives from
the forgotten corners of history—narratives that typically reveal the narrow margins and
unpleasant means by which some of British history’s most significant events occurred, from the
withdrawal of the Romans to the writing of the Magna Carta. Moreover, Puck obliterates the
children’s memories immediately following each encounter, adding another layer of
 discontinuity and confusion to Kipling’s already chaotic historical formulation.
well-known “Whig history” of England serves as a perfect example of the type of historical narrative that Kipling’s
works set out to dispel, one in which the past is read as a justification for present undaunted pride, complacency, and
assured national sovereignty: “For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the
history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement. . . . no man who is correctly informed as to the past
will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.”
Additionally, I investigate Kipling’s supposed instrument of universal order, cryptically referred to as the Law in many of his works, as I contend that its presence in a narrative like *The Jungle Book* actively discounts the view of individual maturation as a movement from simple savagery into civilized adulthood with the aid of universal principles or established codes. Rather, Kipling’s feral Indian boy quickly learns how to manipulate the Law to his advantage, as do the various beasts of the jungle who serve as his teachers, all of which suggests a certain textual ambivalence about the usefulness of unexamined creeds and the possibility of uniform personal improvement. All of Mowgli’s teaching does little to prepare him for his adventures in the wilderness—and here Mowgli’s story resembles Alice’s in its presentation of systematic education’s ultimate futility—unless it can aid him in the effort to exploit or control his animal friends.\(^4^9\) Thus, Mowgli’s progress toward maturity, such as it is, appears as an erratic, recidivistic succession of bad choices and belligerent campaigns instead of a steady improvement under the guiding principles of the Law. Indeed, his enlistment into the British Forestry Service in the story “In the Rukh” (1892) reveals an almost perfect circle in the pattern of his narrative trajectory: he continues to exploit his knowledge of the jungle and its inhabitants, as he has all along, and he ends his days living in immaturity, a feral man among wolves who now hunts for the government instead of for sustenance. Therefore, individual progress remains as much of an illusion as historical progress in Kipling’s texts. Instead of relating accounts of personal or collective improvement, Kipling organizes his tales into reiterative cycles, each affirming the

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\(^4^9\) See, for example, Rudyard Kipling, “Letting in the Jungle,” in *The Jungle Books*, ed. W. W. Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 183-210, 194-5, 201. During Mowgli’s foray among his kind in the village, he muses on the ignorance and virtual lawlessness of man, commenting that they are “blood-brothers of the *Bandar-log,*” the anarchic, self-deluding monkey tribe of the jungle. In a moment of subtle irony, Mowgli identifies himself with the very men he berates, stating “And I—I grow as lazy as they!” and reflecting on the truth of the panther Bagheera’s prediction of “Man goes to Man at the last.” All of this speaks to the subtext of Kipling’s larger narrative about Mowgli, which affirms the utter uselessness of his education under the Law and the inevitability of his degeneration into the spiteful folly of his species. Predictably, Mowgli later abuses the sacred knowledge of the Jungle “Master-words” in order to manipulate the elephant Hathi into enacting his petty vengeance on the man-village that casts him out.
impermanence of human endeavor and rebuking the arrogance of the teleological interpretation of history.
CHAPTER II

“GOOD IS ALWAYS COMING”: VOLITION AND DEFERRAL IN MACDONALD’S FANTASY

I sat a long time, unwilling to go; but my unfinished story urged me on. I must act and wander.

– Anodos, Phantastes

As exhibited in the statement above, uttered by the narrator of George MacDonald’s “Faerie Romance” entitled Phantastes (1858), a compulsion to move exerts a tremendous influence over the characters of his fairy tales. With startling regularity, MacDonald’s fairy-world travelers announce a deep-seated need to “act and wander,” to “go on, as if [their] only path was onward,” even when such movement is against their strongest inclinations.¹ This compulsion typically originates, not as an effect of the characters’ ambitions or desires, but as an external mandate from some transcendent, ill-defined authority, sometimes an allegorical God or Christ and sometimes a less orthodox spiritual entity. The urge to move forward is at times so inexplicably overwhelming as to prevent the characters from exercising their own wills in resisting it. In some cases, the forward movement serves as a metaphor for individual development or education, usually along moral lines, while in others, it manifests as a figure for the inevitable process of maturation, of simply growing up. But in all cases, a character’s willpower or specific volition is the obstacle to be surmounted before MacDonald’s narratives can advance toward their characteristically incomplete resolutions. In fact, contrary to expectations cultivated in the reader of classic fairy tales, with their stock-in-trade “happily ever after” trope, the defeat of the corrupt will in MacDonald’s tales does not result in a glorious apotheosis or fundamental paradigm shift for the characters involved. Rather, the subjugation of

¹ George MacDonald, Phantastes: A Faerie Romance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 32, 54. All subsequent citations of the novel refer to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
Volition achieves little more than a vague, ephemeral hope that things will one day be better than they currently are, that the promised land will eventually appear on the horizon after much toil and confusion.

In this chapter, I suggest that MacDonald’s fairy tales deny the validity of free will as a means to individual progress, a view informed by a restrictive Christianity that denigrates sudden, isolated acts of volition in favor of a gradual spiritual awakening among a community of believers. Conceptually, true progress, for an apocatastatic Christian like MacDonald, is actually regress. It demands the total resignation of one’s personal goals and ideals in favor of an eventual revelation of the purpose of history in the life to come. In addition, I argue that MacDonald fashions his narratives specifically to cultivate the same sense of self-abnegation and patient expectancy in his readers that he generates in his characters. Finally, I explore the dissatisfaction and anxiety produced (in the characters and in the reader) by a narrative system that denies the efficacy of individual, willed effort and continuously defers any sort of culmination or completion of either the quest for personal ideals or the fulfillment of communal hopes. MacDonald’s works may devalue the pursuit of individual ideals in favor of a disciplined program of Christian redemption, but they nonetheless rely on the capacity for hope that propels

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2 This philosophy of history contrasts with that of Carlyle, Comte, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, representing the prevailing metaphysical systems of the nineteenth century, which largely endorse the opposite view, whereby the individual acts of Great Men apparently dictate history’s direction and testify to some transcendent energy or force common to all, but dormant and ineffectual without the assistance of willful individuals. MacDonald’s characters are discouraged from making individual contributions or reforms; instead, they must learn how to obey and serve in humility, even without the promise of success or reward.

3 See MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 185. Here, I use the term “regress” in its standard meaning, signifying a literal or figurative movement away from a recognized ideal, or more desirable condition, and toward a baser, less desirable or more immature state (i.e. from knowledge to ignorance). However, I am also using it to denote the logical process of reasoning from effect to cause: MacDonald’s characters abandon traditional reasoning to embrace the Leibnizian precept that God’s essential goodness can be applied as a rubric for interpreting the inexplicable or even catastrophic events of their everyday lives. In other words, because God is good and has promised resurrection, “good is always coming,” even when actual conditions suggest the opposite to the individual observer: “Yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.” And for a lucid definition of the complex term “apocatastasis,” see also Alice A. Kuzniar, *Delayed Endings: Nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 70: “In religious terminology this is called *apocatastasis*—the reestablishment or recovery of the past at the end of time.”
that initial pursuit. In MacDonald’s fairy tales, hope in the always distant ideal replaces the achievable goal, and thus his characters rarely achieve what they set out to do, both individually and within the body of believers. MacDonald’s tales depict perpetual disappointment as a simple fact of human existence, and in doing so, they negate the possibility of self-motivated individual progress.

A retired Congregationalist minister, George MacDonald the writer actively continued to preach his unique theology in his works of fantasy. Rather than confirming the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, MacDonald endorsed a somewhat radical theory of virtually limitless redemption that dispenses with the notion that, through the unfettered exercise of their free will, some are beyond the mercy of God: “In contrast to his strict Calvinist contemporaries, MacDonald held that hell was finite; God controlled it and the damned could be redeemed even after death.”

When coupled with his other primary tenet—that only those who are “converted, and become as little children” shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, founded on his rather literal reading of Jesus’s well-known answer to his disciples’ question about who is the greatest among the redeemed in Matthew 18:1-6—MacDonald’s theology asserts the eventual, total annihilation of free will. Under MacDonald’s comprehensive system, salvation is an inevitable condition, an eschatological fait accompli. No one can actively choose to reject God’s mercy indefinitely, not even “the great Shadow” of Satan himself. Instead, all souls shall ultimately

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5 See George MacDonald, Lilith: A Romance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 215-18. All subsequent citations of Lilith will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically. Lilith’s symbiotic companion in wickedness goes by the moniker “the great Shadow,” an obvious pseudonym for Satan in MacDonald’s religious allegory. According to Eve, only the Shadow can actually kill Lilith, “and whom he kills never knows she is dead, but lives to do his will, and thinks she is doing her own.” Significantly, this statement renders all individual volition as inherently evil, converting the idea of self-control or acting willfully into simple vanity. The connection with Satan becomes even more explicit in Lilith with Eve’s declaration, “Even now is his head under my heel!” Nevertheless, even the Shadow has a place reserved in the rehabilitative “House of Death”: “When the Shadow comes here, it will be to lie down and sleep also—His hour will come, and he knows it will.”
receive redemption, whether they seek it or not, and they shall do so by abandoning the process of maturation, by arresting their development and remaining in a state of “childlike” passivity.6 Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how MacDonald’s stories reflect his theological opposition to uninhibited volition, and I investigate the means by which he accomplishes the total acquiescence of his characters.

Prior to MacDonald’s innovative contributions to the genre of children’s literature in the 1850s, narrative conventions had remained relatively stable since the late eighteenth century. During the early years of the nineteenth century in England, most books for children fell under the broad designation of what Harvey Darton and many other literary historians call the didactic or persuasive “moral tale.”7 Written mostly by female authors concerned with inculcating a firm sense of the British Protestant ethic into their audience’s young minds, moral tales typically featured precociously naughty children learning the errors of their ways through forceful, sometimes brutal behavioral reform and punishment. Such tales consistently failed to engage their supposed target audience, however popular they may have been with the middle-class parents who bought and read them. Delivered as from the pulpit or political platform, they demanded too much of the inquisitive child reader, required too much investment in issues beyond the scope of youth’s comprehension. As Darton rightfully suggests, these stories prescribed tireless, exhaustive behavioral modification that often disheartened children with stringent, unreasonable expectations: “[Moral tales] cannot but give a certain impression of

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6 See George MacDonald, “The Child in the Midst” in Unspoken Sermons (Series One) (London: Alexander Strahan, 1867), 2, 26. MacDonald clarifies his reading of Christ’s words to demonstrate the possessive, controlling nature of a God who allows no room for individual agency and leaves nothing to the messy mismanagement of free will: “These passages record a lesson our Lord gave his disciples against ambition, against emulation. . . . Life is no series of chances with a few providences sprinkled between to keep up a justly failing belief, but one providence of God . . . .”

rigidity, of inhuman excellence, of making life not worth the living in the attempt to live it worthily.”

However, with the watershed publication of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865, preceded by Charles Kingsley’s only tentatively experimental fairy tale *The Water-Babies* in 1863, imaginative children’s literature entered into a new, less explicitly hegemonic and homiletic era. Although it rarely receives the serious critical attention it merits by virtue of its chronological situation, MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, though subtitularly addressed to “Men and Women” rather than children, precedes both of these works in the vanguard of revolutionary fantasy, offering its readers something of a transitional genre between the formulaic lesson-books and their more avant-garde successors. However, major architects of the mid-century renaissance of the folkloric fantasy tale like Kingsley and MacDonald hardly abandoned the moral imperative of their predecessors. Instead, they concealed their moral agendas within highly symbolic and polyvalent imagery, language, and archetypical characterization. They peopled their tales with reimaged mythological and religious figures who speak in riddles and hint at vast significances or revelations that dwarf whatever banal platitude they happen to be promoting in the short term.

Like the illusionary autonomy of his characters’ actions, MacDonald’s narratives—beginning with *Phantastes* and carrying through to his last major work, *Lilith* (1895)—offer the promise of unrestricted interpretation, but they deny any sustained reading that contradicts their surreptitious allegorical scaffolding. In his well-known critical essay “The Fantastic Imagination” (1893), MacDonald insists that his fairy tales are both allegorical and super-allegorical. They both contain and transcend allegory, allowing his narratives the dubious

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9 See U. C. Knoepflmacher, “Buttonholing the Reader: A Preface of Sorts” in *Ventures Into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), xi-xvii, xi: “In 1865, the publication of *Alice in Wonderland* completed the erosion of a didactic and empirical tradition of children’s literature that had been dominated by female authors for over a century.”
privilege to simultaneously restrict and liberate the reader’s imagination: “A fairytale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory. He must be an artist indeed who can, in any mode, produce a strict allegory that is not a weariness to the spirit.” MacDonald goes on to say, rather glibly, that any reader incapable of deciphering his tales should simply admit as much, for he refuses to explain himself in coarser, less imaginative terms:

A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean. If my drawing, on the other hand, is so far from being a work of art that it needs THIS IS A HORSE written under it, what can it matter that neither you nor your child should know what it means? . . . A meaning may be there, but it is not for you. If, again, you do not know a horse when you see it, the name written under it will not serve you much. At all events, the business of the painter is not to teach zoology.

On first reading, MacDonald’s abstruse comments on his semi-allegorical stories recall Christ’s frequent hermeneutical advice of “who hath ears to hear, let him hear,” given to those listeners with hearts too obdurate to comprehend the deeper meaning of his parables. Unlike Jesus, however, MacDonald will not condescend to explanation. His tales are meant to “wake a meaning” rather than merely transmit ideology. And if one such tale fails to do so, the fault lies not with the tale, but with the reader, who cannot recognize the hegemonic horse in front of him. Similarly, MacDonald’s characters must accept that there is significance in the experiences they undergo, but they must do so without any explanation of that significance. They must simply let go their intentions and move forward, foregoing the desire to arrive somewhere, achieve something, or understand the meaning of their actions.

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11 Ibid., 7.
12 Among other examples, see Matthew 13: 9-23. In this passage, Christ offers his theological reasons for teaching in parables and then proceeds to explain the parable of the sower in detail for the benefit of his bewildered disciples.
Strict or otherwise, MacDonald’s allegorical tales produce a surprising “weariness to the spirit” in his characters, a tedious melancholy that questions the validity of choosing to perform an activity or endorse a belief that represents a foregone conclusion, especially when that choice results in nothing more substantial than the interminable continuation of his / her “unfinished story.” Repeatedly, MacDonald’s wandering heroes fruitlessly pursue their ideals, only to be informed that their true ideals are quite different and located elsewhere, far beyond their reach. Omniscient but infuriatingly ambiguous “guides” reveal that each of the hero’s decisions has been preordained as an aid to his or her spiritual growth, but they also insist that the one true path to spiritual maturity is to abandon decisiveness entirely and blindly obey the dictates of their spiritual betters, since acts of individual volition originate from the corrupt will of Satan. In short, MacDonald’s narratives rely on a paradoxical union between an individual desire to improve and an inescapable abandonment of that desire; they utilize the impetus toward progress to demonstrate that progress’s ultimate futility.

“TOUCH NOT!”: Sublimated Volition and Deferred Realization in Phantastes

The hero of George MacDonald’s first novel, Phantastes, contains the key to his character in his name. He is called Anodos, a Greek word meaning either “pathless” or “rising” depending on the context, but in MacDonald’s labyrinthine Fairy Land, Anodos continuously evokes both meanings. As Rolland Hein notes, Anodos’s apparent lack of direction coincides with a determined, compulsory spiritual advancement: “Anodos wanders through Faerie in a seemingly aimless manner, but all that happens to him has the power to make him rise, or grow,

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13 See note 5 above.
so that he is in the process of becoming a better person.” Individual improvement remains paramount in MacDonald’s fantasies, even when the events of the narratives appear to occur without a recognizable pattern or definite purpose. Anodos’s wandering is only “seemingly aimless.” But as the guardian of the threshold affirms near the beginning of his adventures, Anodos’s apparently simple desire to “see all that is to be seen” in Fairy Land conceals a design of more substantial, though unimaginable, importance: “. . . no one comes here but for some reason, either known to himself or to those who have charge of him; so you shall do just as you wish” (15). Of course, this statement is a blatant self-contradiction. Anodos has just revealed his ignorance of the real “reason” why he has come to Fairy Land—an involuntary journey toward Christian redemption initiated by his obtuse fairy great-grandmother—so he clearly falls under the heading of those in the “charge” of the unseen powers, which means he can hardly “do just as [he] wish[es].”

Indeed, Anodos will never be allowed to do as he wishes in MacDonald’s Fairy Land because everything he wishes expresses his need for confirmation or completion, for a reliable epistemology founded on either physical contact and its accompanying empirical evidence or on a greater understanding of the bizarre characters and events he encounters. Instead of enjoying a dawning comprehension brought about through experimentation, through trial and error, Anodos learns that truth can never be fully comprehended, ideals cannot be realized, and therefore he accumulates practically no information about himself or any of the denizens of Fairy Land. Contrary to the typical critical reading of his fantasy, I contend that, through Anodos, MacDonald orchestrates the total deconstruction of the quest motif common to almost all fairy

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tale literature by denying his hero any genuine free will.\textsuperscript{15} In its place, he substitutes a sort of accidental \textit{bildungsroman} wherein the protagonist succumbs to nebulous improvement without his explicit knowledge or consent.\textsuperscript{16} Throughout the narrative, Anodos’s willful actions accomplish nothing but awkward narrative digressions, as he repeatedly fails to comprehend the reformative value of his experiences, but he does gradually develop an inane sense of hope in an imminent, ill-defined “good.” Like the Victorians who comprised his audience, MacDonald’s hero confronts his total lack of influence on historical events. He then substitutes a utopian expectancy of eventual perfection—the result of God’s providence and the ultimate termination of human history, of course—for the rational analysis of his lived experiences. In doing so, he effectively denies the possibility of volitional progression (or regression, for that matter), of self-motivated improvement, while he clings to a dream of inevitable redemption. Thus does MacDonald evince the Victorian predilection to assess and categorize the apparently random events of history, while simultaneously dismissing any individual’s power to affect those events.\textsuperscript{17} Anodos, the pathless one, tries to decipher the strange world in which he moves, learns

\textsuperscript{15} See, for one example, Jack Zipes, \textit{Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion} (New York: Routledge, 1983), 107: “It should be pointed out, however, that MacDonald was more interested in the reformation of social character and was convinced that all social change emanated from the development of personal integrity not necessarily through political restructuring and upheaval. This belief is why he stressed ethical choice and action through intense quests and experiences.” For another example, see Stephen Prickett, \textit{Victorian Fantasy} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 182: “As a result, what Chesterton calls MacDonald’s ‘optimistic Calvinism’ can include and contain a tragic vision, that is unlike any other writer from the period. Freewill exists; choice is important, and has necessary, if unpredictable, consequences.”

\textsuperscript{16} See Elaine Ostry, “Moral Growth and Moral Lessons; or, How the Conduct Book Informed Victorian and Edwardian Children’s Fantasy,” \textit{The Lion and the Unicorn} 27 (2003): 27-56, 30. In her analysis of the evolution of the British children’s story of moral reform, Ostry insists that an uncertain “responsibility” to improve bestowed on each story’s hero constitutes a “form of independence”: “Although the child is not granted independence in the sense of freedom and power, he or she is granted responsibility for his or her own moral development, a form of independence.” I maintain that any such responsibility only contains an illusion of independence, for the narrative precludes any viable choice the child might make to decline to improve.

\textsuperscript{17} See Jerome H. Buckley, \textit{The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 13: “Whatever the historian’s effort to achieve objectivity, public change could seldom for long be contemplated with a calm detachment; it called for evaluation as advance or decline, change for the better or change for the worse.”
that he cannot, and thereafter blithely insists that “good is always coming” to him and to everyone, though we cannot see it or hope to find it ourselves.

According to St. Augustine, free will exists as an indispensible component of God’s justice, for without it, neither divine punishment nor reward would be possible within the intractable parameters of God’s perfection. Obligatory deeds, deprived of the will, are essentially meaningless in the eyes of God, for “what was not done by will would be neither evildoing nor right action.”

However, in MacDonald’s Christian mysticism, the inherently flawed human will remains a more negotiable element, and his narratives forcefully communicate this negotiability. Incredibly, critics of his work have consistently highlighted MacDonald’s steadfast defense of the freedom of the individual will, describing his depiction of Christian liberty as “essentially Augustinian.” While I concede that MacDonald’s characters do perform a sort of prefatory mind-purgation in order to receive the inevitable truths his narratives inculcate, such an act hardly qualifies as an example of legitimate volition. As Hein confirms, the scope of a MacDonald hero’s willful action is limited to humble acquiescence, to a willingness as opposed to a willfulness: “If an individual [in MacDonald’s fiction] wills to keep his mind and imagination clean, God may be trusted to give an appreciable amount of truth.”

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19 See George MacDonald, “The Higher Faith” in *Unspoken Sermons (Series One)* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1867), 57-8. In a sermon on the doctrine of Thomas, concerning the blessedness of a belief that rests on faith as opposed to proximate, empirical evidence, MacDonald discourses on the refining or reformative quality of God’s spirit, his “consuming fire,” which gradually burns off the undesirable selfishness and blindness that inhibit individuals in their search for eternal truth. He basically argues that when any man asks something of God, representing an act of will, his request will either be good and in accordance with God’s wishes for him, or a blatant impossibility. In other words, man cannot ask something inappropriate of God, thus exercising his imperfect will according to his own desires; his desires are always already sublimated in God’s “consuming fire.” Similarly, if he prays for what he “likes best,” his inclination must indicate God’s *a priori* approval of the request, which was influenced by his guiding Spirit: “What a man likes best may be God’s will, may be the voice of the Spirit striving with his spirit, not against it; and if, as I have said, it be not so—if the thing he asks is not according to his will—there is that consuming fire. . . . But I doubt if a man can ask anything from God that is bad.”
21 Ibid., 200.
intellectual quietus occurs midway through Phantastes, when Anodos’s path through Fairy Land terminates on a dismal shore where “hopeless waves rushed constantly shoreward” and all is “bare, and waste, and gray” (125). On this barren threshold, Anodos has come at last upon the wasteland of the ego, the empty loneliness of the indomitable will. Like a caged animal, he attempts to continue his ostensibly self-determined path by “wander[ing] over the stones, up and down the beach, a human embodiment of the nature around [him].” Ultimately, however, his only choice, save being “tortured to death” in extreme isolation, is to hurl himself into the sea, signifying his baptismal “death to self” and the beginning of his redemption and true calling. But can we characterize Anodos’s symbolic suicide as an act of independence, as a genuinely willful act? Anodos does not actually choose to grow or progress here, where the only alternatives available are the slow death of starvation and the quick death of immolation; he enters the waves with the intention to stop moving, to literally “cease,” as Lilith, another of MacDonald’s forcibly redeemed characters, says during her exhaustive rehabilitation.22 Actually, what appears to be Anodos’s greatest act of will, his refusal to suffer in an eternal desolation not unlike the mythical Hades of the Greeks by actively bringing about an end to his existence (and his story), becomes just another opportunity for growth provided by the unseen powers who hold him in their “charge.” He sinks into the nurturing waves of absolution in a passage stunningly evocative of Freud’s conception of the “oceanic feeling,” wherein the ego “includes everything,” fostering a distinctly religious perception of “limitlessness and of a bond with the universe.”23 Such regressive bonding with the symbolic eternal, redolent with overtly maternal imagery, liberates the individual from the accountability associated with willful action, even as it implicitly

22 MacDonald, Lilith, 207: “‘Ah, if he would but help me to cease! Not even that am I capable of! I have no power over myself; I am a slave! I acknowledge it. Let me die.’”
demonizes any act of independence as movement away from God and his eternal, redemptive truth.\textsuperscript{24} However, Anodos does not relinquish total control over his actions even after his accidental baptism. On the contrary, the whole of \textit{Phantastes} can be seen as a succession of failed attempts by Anodos to exercise his free will.

Just as Anodos cannot “do just as [he] wish[es]” in Fairy Land, MacDonald’s readers cannot practice an educated analysis of his works without violating their indelible, transcendent truths. MacDonald’s fictive worlds represent closed interpretive systems, both to the protagonists operating within them and the readers following along outside the text. Without his acknowledgement of the immutable authority of the evocative text, a reader’s quest for significance can have no legitimate success on its own, which elevates MacDonald’s narratives near the imposing status of hagiography, or even actual scripture.\textsuperscript{25} As mentioned above, he denies his “work[s] of imagination” any gloss or coherent hermeneutic with which to decode their highly complex and suggestive symbolism due to his characterization of such an act as “intellectual greed.”\textsuperscript{26} As a result, neither the main character, nor the reader, can hope to achieve anything even resembling an understanding of his narratives without embracing an exegetical passivity, without assuming the metaphorical position of “an aeolian harp” that can assert no meaning of its own, but can only be “move[d] by suggestion” and “cause[d] to imagine.”\textsuperscript{27} In short, both character as model and reader as disciple must give up their epistemological

\textsuperscript{24} See MacDonald, \textit{Phantastes}, 126. The ocean into which Anodos plunges receives him “with loving arms” and offers him “a blessing, like the kiss of a mother,” soothing his fears as though he were “a sick little child.”


\textsuperscript{26} See MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” 10: “We spoil countless precious things by intellectual greed. He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must—he cannot help himself—become a little man, that is, a dwarf.”

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
independence; they must forego “ambition” or “emulation,”—two qualities MacDonald repeatedly denounces in his Unspoken Sermons (1867-1889)—in favor of a sustained attitude of childlike wonder. Such narratives invariably teach that individual progress, whether in the form of intellectual or moral development, is an arrogant illusion. True reform can come only from without, not from within, just as true understanding rests in an eternal verity that transcends the personal reading experience. Thus, when MacDonald’s characters actively strive for improvement, they not only fail to achieve it, but also cause considerable damage to themselves and others. This enforced passivity also precludes them from achieving the various telos of their narratives, which accomplishment might otherwise reawaken a sense of pride or contentment, an opportunity to “cease.” Such an ending remains an impossibility in MacDonald’s writing, for it would require the total revelation of God’s perfect truth, the final utopia of Christ’s chialistic reign. As Alice Kuzniar notes in her study on Novalis, the German romantic writer of fantasy who exerted such a tremendous influence over MacDonald’s writing, the story that bases its authority on eternal truth or “divine revelation,” on the eventual reinstitution of the primordial condition of man through apocatastasis, can never come to an end: “Narratively speaking, the end of a story that purports to depict ultimate, divine revelation never arrives.”

In Phantastes, MacDonald seems to have rendered his Fairy Land in as close an approximation as he could to unbridled, imaginative disorder—his other realm teems with bizarre creatures, some humanoid and others so uncanny as to appear horrific or nightmarish. Geographically, the Fairy Land of the novel undulates, attenuates, expands; it combines with the imagined topography of the books Anodos reads and envelopes vivid memories from his past. However, these elements of structural chaos make up an elaborate façade, behind which remains a rigid, unflinchingly didactic allegory that controls Anodos’s every move and every decision.

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28 Kuzniar, Delayed Endings, 70.
Accordingly, his story is replete with circumstances in which he cannot control his actions, as is
blatantly the case in the cabin of the ogress where he acquires his grotesque “shadow” as the
result of “an irresistible attraction” (55).²⁹ And the characters who cross his path, however
inexplicable their conversation or unlikely their appearance, invariably return to teach Anodos a
banal lesson about resisting desire or transcending the limitations of self. Despite the extended
quotation of Novalis that serves as the conceptual epigraph to *Phantastes*, the novel never attains
any real sense of the “Zeit der Anarchie, der Gesetzlosigkeit, Freiheit” [time of anarchy, of
lawlessness, freedom] because Anodos always walks along a fixed path toward the doom of his
inevitable redemption.³⁰

The limitations that bring about the erosion of Anodos’s willpower begin early in the
narrative. In fact, the impetus for his journey into Fairy Land comes, not from his desire or
curiosity, but from an authoritative female fairy who emerges from a hidden compartment in his
father’s desk. MacDonald characterizes his hero as an indecisive, listless young man, much like
Mr. Vane (his counterpart in *Lilith*), who begins his adventure with an ill-defined urge to explore
the contents of his father’s “secretary” in the hope that such an activity might help fill in the
blanks of his “web of story” (6). In the first of the novel’s many instances of forbidden

²⁹ For a sampling of the other numerous examples of Anodos’s unwitting actions in response to an irresistible force,
see MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 32 (quoted above); 36: “By an inexplicable, though by no means unusual kind of
impulse, I went on removing the moss from the surface of the stone . . .”; 43: “My voice burst into song so
spontaneously that it seemed involuntary”; 74: “Nor, I grieve to say, did I ever come much nearer to these glorious
beings, or ever look upon the Queen of the Fairies herself. My destiny ordered otherwise”; 161: “I entered, for I
could not help myself; and the shadow followed me.”
130-49, 131. Harvey contends that any work of fiction automatically appears deterministic to its reader by virtue of
its status as a completed narrative, whereas to the characters involved in the action of the plot, such determinism
remains beyond comprehension: “But this inexorability appears only to the reader; the freedom—or the illusion of
freedom—for the character within the sequence is preserved, since for him the future appears indeterminate and at
each stage his decision opens up new possibilities from which he is free to choose.” In my reading, it is precisely
Anodos’s tentative awareness of his own predetermined path that reveals the problem of willpower in MacDonald’s
novel. Unlike characters in more realistic works of fiction, Anodos cannot make a choice that will have reasonably
predictable results in the moments to follow, and he appears to know this; his ability to weigh the cost of his
decisions is limited by his conscious ignorance of the qualities and laws of Fairy Land.
consummation, the stentorian fairy-woman, who may be Anodos’s great-grandmother, denies his first unvoiced request for an embrace, saying “‘Foolish boy, if you could touch me, I should hurt you.’” She then informs him that he will travel to Fairy Land in accordance with his “wish” from the previous night, though her description of Anodos’s conversation with his younger sister hardly contains a conscious wish for anything: “‘Your little sister was reading a fairy-tale to you last night... When she had finished, she said, as she closed the book, ‘Is there a fairy-country, brother?’ You replied with a sigh, ‘I suppose there is, if one could find the way into it.’” This casual remark, likely uttered with the harmless intent of placating his younger sister, becomes Anodos’s dubious “wish” to enter Fairy Land. Significantly, when he attempts to inform the fairy-woman of his reason for the remark—“But I meant something quite different from what you seem to think”—she dismisses it immediately and declares his imminent departure for the other realm in the manner of a train conductor or military officer: “You shall find the way into Fairy Land tomorrow” (8). Immediately following this imperative, she performs an ad hoc hypnotism, filling Anodos with “an unknown longing” associated with repressed memories of his dead mother, which takes the visual form of a vast sea (an obvious precursor to the suicide scene in Chapter 18 described above). Thus the entire inception of Anodos’s journey into Fairy Land comes from this commanding female apparition: the adventure is not of his own choosing, as his subsequent experiences will make only too clear.

Anodos’s strange story can best be glossed within the framework of his ill-advised pursuit of the ideals of his own making. Like a lovelorn Pygmalion, he calls forth a beautiful form from solid alabaster stone, which he then proceeds to chase across the wilds of Fairy Land. Additionally, in the center of MacDonald’s novel, Anodos reads the story of Cosmo, a nested narrative that mirrors Anodos’s own obsession with his elusive “white lady.” Through an
analysis of these instances of unconsummated pursuit, I demonstrate MacDonald’s denigration of willful movement toward a self-appointed goal, his anti-progressive stance on acts of individual volition. In doing so, I also draw out certain passages—oblique enough in isolation but significant in their collective implications for interpreting MacDonald’s texts—which exhibit the same sentiment, albeit directed against willful exegesis of the narrative instead of willful action in the pursuit of actual ideals within the plot, even when those passages allegedly represent Anodos’s internal thoughts.31

Anodos’s first ideal appears not long after he leaves the shelter of the cottage of the four trees, in which he gains cryptic knowledge about the unknown wood before him from a conventional advisory initiate. This guide fulfills the role of what Joseph Campbell calls the “threshold guardian,” a liminal figure of ambiguous constitution who marks the boundary between the world of ontological stability and the realm of the foreign and unknown.32

Beginning a series of incidents in which Anodos hears ciphered, unintelligible advice before he can apply it to its corresponding experience in Fairy Land, a strange maiden approaches Anodos with bizarre instructions about the trees he should and should not trust in the wood. Interestingly, Anodos admits to the advice’s vacuity but immediately qualifies this admission with his

31 See Alan Singer, “Introduction” in The Subject As Action: Transformation and Totality in Narrative Aesthetics (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993), 1-16, 16. Here, I am essentially applying Singer’s argument for an emphasis on the various contingencies of activity present in novelistic fiction as opposed to the construction of an artificial “subjectivity” for the purposes of theoretical investigation. As Singer writes, “The acceptance of the constitutive role of contingency in the novel and in novel theory is the revelation that the subject of action in the novel is activity itself: in other words, subjectivity cannot be theorized independent of the contingencies of action.” Although the telos of Anodos’s narrative presupposes a quest for redemption, and although his narrative is delivered in the first person retrospective voice, I contend that Anodos’s actions add to the constitution of his narrative identity. His textual identity is not limited to the articulations of an introspective mouthpiece which exists primarily to explicate MacDonald’s allegorical edifice within the story. Whenever Anodos’s actions disagree with or contradict his words, I contend his actions remain a viable clue to determining his character.

32 See Joseph Campbell, “The Crossing of the First Threshold” in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 64-73, 64: “With the personifications of his destiny to aid and guide him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the ‘threshold guardian’ at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. Such custodians bound the world in the four directions—also up and down—standing for the limits of the hero’s present sphere, or life horizon.”
declaration of faith in its future vindication: “I could not conjecture what she meant, but satisfied myself with thinking that it would be time enough to find out her meaning when there was need to make use of her warning, and that the occasion would reveal the admonition” (11). In this clever bit of sophistry, Anodos seems to make a solid decision, but in doing so, he implicitly questions the power of his narrative agency to affect subsequent events. He admits to his ignorance of the message’s import and actively chooses to table its interpretation until some future occurrence makes it comprehensible, indicating that the narrative itself, his “unfinished story,” has control over his future. Active investigation or analysis cannot achieve what simple watch-and-wait passivity will surely provide. Intentionality has no place in Fairy Land, where one must never try “to account for things”; instead, “one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so” and resigns to “[take] everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing” (24).

During the scene in which Anodos evokes his ideal, the white lady of the alabaster cave, MacDonald demonstrates his narrative’s capacity to control its interpretation and its hero in a comprehensive web of predetermined “choices.” Like the inevitable encounter with the ghoulish Ash tree and his deceptive companion, the Maid of the Alder-tree, as the fulfillment of the mysterious maiden’s unsolicited advice, Anodos’s activities in the marble cave exemplify his total lack of mastery over the events of his adventure. Upon his departure from the cottage of the four trees, the diminutive fairies of the garden comment on his incidental role in the narrative, indicating that the eternal “story” calls the shots, whomever the current traveler might be: “‘Look at him! Look at him! He has begun a story without a beginning, and it will never have any end” (24). As he wanders deeper into the wood, always bearing east without any conscious reason to do so, Anodos finds that his perception of objects in Fairy Land balks at direct observation.
When he attempts to verify the presence of one of these “other shapes, more like my own in size and mien,” they fade back into the periphery, just out of his line of sight: “I constantly imagined, however, that forms were visible in all directions except that to which my gaze was turned; and that they only became invisible, or resolved themselves into other woodland shapes, the moment my looks were directed towards them” (25). Analogously indicating the inevitable failure of willed analysis or intentionality, Anodos’s fixed “regard” transforms the ephemeral occupants of the wood into “a bush, or a tree, or a rock.” His limited perception continues later in the book, when he cannot accurately discern the features of a group of villagers upon his advancing to within a few paces of them. Again, MacDonald locates the evil firmly in the individual will, as Anodos remains imprisoned within the distorting bubble of his volition and cannot make contact with those around him when he chooses to do so: “. . . whenever I came within a certain distance of any one of them . . . the whole appearance of the person began to change; and this change increased in degree as I approached. When I receded to the former distance, the former appearance was restored” (63). He must learn “the right focal distance” to achieve any interaction with these others, just as he had to acquire “a more complete relationship” with the wraithlike occupants of the wood. No conscious act of will achieves Anodos’s inclinations; he

33 See MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 33. It should be noted that, once he partakes of the fruits and nuts of the wood, Anodos begins to see the evanescent forms more clearly, though not completely so. He also admits to feeling more secure about his choice of direction through the wood, which suggests that the power of the fruit provides not only physical nourishment, but also cognitive remediation: “. . . for [the forest food] not only satisfied my hunger, but operated in such a way upon my senses, that I was brought into far more complete relationship with the things around me. . . . I seemed to know better which direction to choose when any doubt arose.”

34 See Alice Kuzniar, “Future Perfect” in *Delayed Endings*, 68-71, 69. This constrained perception recalls the pattern of delayed or deferred revelation discussed in Kuzniar’s analysis of Novalis. Anodos’s full realization of one of these “other shapes” would likely instigate a localized, micropsychic parousia, or apocalypse. Just as Moses cannot look full on the face of God during their conversation on Mount Sinai, Anodos cannot observe these elusive forms under his own strength of will; he must abandon that desire and trust in some future revelation. As Kuzniar writes, “The future perfect anticipates supplementarity.” Nevertheless, under this model, Anodos must continue to desire improvement; he just cannot effect it himself or expect to arrive at some ameliorative terminus. The vanishing point of spiritual / moral perfection is “always imminent”: “The prolonged use of the future perfect thus dispels the myth of a return to normalcy; it staves off what would be an imagined regaining of an integral self. All the while, however, the future perfect permits patient and analyst to postulate conditions for what the subject currently is not and yet desires to be.”
must resign willful intention and assume a passive position. However, inhibited perception functions as a mere structural analogy of MacDonald’s disempowerment of the individual will; Anodos’s inert agency becomes truly apparent in his involuntary creation of the feminine ideal, the “white lady.”

In Chapter V, MacDonald constructs an allusion of impenetrable strength, rendering the events described therein as legible in only one legitimate way: as an analogue to the story of Pygmalion. MacDonald even prefaces this chapter with an epigraph from Thomas Lovell Beddoes’s poem *Pygmalion* (1825), evoking that work’s revisionist rendering of Ovid’s tale, wherein the master sculptor wastes away to madness and only sees life in his creation after his death. Having survived an attack by the Ash-tree with the aid of the beautiful Beech, Anodos wanders through the wood with the increased awareness of his surroundings that his consumption of forest food has provided. His path always lies before him as an invisible, yet undeviating, line, and he follows its silent suggestion like a locomotive on its track: “Over this [bare, rocky hill] my way seemed to lie, and I immediately began the ascent. . . . these [creeping plants] almost concealed an opening in the rock, into which the path appeared to lead” (34-5).35 The interior of the cave immediately arrests Anodos’s attention, its idyllic features filling him with inspiration and rendering him almost comatose with aesthetic contemplation: “Here I lay in a delicious reverie for some time; during which all lovely forms, and colours, and sounds seemed

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35 See Jason Harris, “MacDonald’s Lilith and Phantastes: In Pursuit of the Soul in Fairyland” in *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 89-101, 94. Interestingly, Harris posits a discord among the generic conventions of the traditional folk tale, the didactic agenda of the author, and the rational will of its hero, exemplified by Anodos’s seemingly arbitrary decision to leave the path early in the novel. MacDonald needs his flawed hero to stray from the straight and narrow, so Anodos complies, and his action accords with conventional expectations. Bizarrely, however, Anodos comments on the action’s irrationality as he performs it: “Here I left [the path], without any good reason, and with a vague feeling that I ought to have followed its course” (10). As Harris notes, this metafictional aside calls attention to the conflict between Anodos’s rationality and the demanding, irrational surroundings of MacDonald’s allegorical Fairy Land: “A folk tale hero would not bother to comment on such behavior. MacDonald is well aware of the commonplace motif of ’straying from the path’ in fairy tales, and here Anodos inexplicably (to him) does just that. Yet, as readers we know that he must get ‘lost in the woods.’ The reference to the lack of ‘good reason’ signifies the exertion of the generic requirements of the fairy tale over Anodos’s free will—represented, of course, as the rational faculty.”
to use my brain as a common hall, where they could come and go, unbidden and unexcused” (35). The complete passivity displayed in this passage exemplifies Anodos’s powerlessness over the events about to transpire; evanescent ideals literally possess his waking mind, invading and then abandoning his consciousness “unbidden and unexcused.” After he sips some water from a pool in the cave—he compares it to “the elixir of life”—the ideas actually “use” his “brain” like the hallucinations of a drug-induced stupor. Upon coming to, Anodos realizes that his gaze seems to have been directed at a “time-worn bas-relief” depicting Pygmalion at the feet of his creation. Significantly, his language indicates that he does not happen to glance in the direction of the object, but is actually forced to look at it: “. . . I became aware that my eyes were fixed on a strange, time-worn bas-relief on the rock opposite me.”

Predictably, Anodos notes the cave’s walls are made of soft, semi-transparent alabaster, and he sees a vague silhouette of ideal beauty within the stone, an outline of a woman in repose on her side. Astutely attributing his sudden musical prowess and his “increased impulse to sing” to the water he has just consumed, Anodos begins to serenade the image in the stone, hoping that, like Orpheus, he can attract even the insensible rock to him with beautiful music. The words of his song, however, escape his narrative memory. They seem to belong to something else, something outside of him, and he characterizes the rough translation he provides of the ineffable song as “a dull representation of a state whose very elevation precluded the possibility of remembrance; and in which I presume the words really employed were as far above these, as that state transcended this wherein I recall it” (37-8). As he laments more than once, Anodos ultimately brings “nothing with [him] out of Fairy Land but memories—memories” (32), yet during this central event in the cave, he loses even those: the experience transpires at some privileged existential “elevation,” which denies even “the possibility of remembrance.”
Moreover, the language suggests that the words of his song were given him; he refers to them as “the words really employed” rather than “the words I sang.” His lady freed, he watches helplessly as she bolts from the cave and into the forest, providing an impetus to forward motion for the plot and a continuous object lesson in the futility of pursuing selfish ideals. Thus Anodos, having been brainwashed into entering Fairy Land, now succumbs to an enforced moral reformation for his supposed obsession with an ideal not genuinely of his making. With a disquieted resignation, Anodos accepts his narrative fate and hurries after his “white lady”: “It seemed useless to follow, yet follow I must” (40).

Two other instances of Anodos’s compulsory idealization, each followed by an almost cruel denial of even the most superficial consummation for him, will elucidate MacDonald’s wholesale devaluation of volition, but first, some attention must be given to the implications of his shadow, another clear symbol of MacDonald’s contempt for unregulated volition. After his horrifying confrontation with the Maid of the Alder-tree, whose Janusian appearance seduces Anodos into consorting with a monster, he vows not to be “headstrong or too confident anymore” and moves deeper into Fairy Land (54). He acquires his grotesque shadow through an act of willful curiosity, desiring to see what lies behind a closet door in the ogress’s house, though he has no clear idea of his whereabouts at the time. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Anodos’s shadow comes to him; he does not go and fetch it himself. In another example of his involuntary rigidity, Anodos remains frozen while his shadow runs to meet him, representing the final stage of its apparently relentless search for him. The ogress tells him as much, suggesting an unpleasant inevitability about the whole affair: “‘Everybody’s shadow is ranging up and down looking for him. . . . yours has found you, as every person’s is almost certain to do who looks into that closet, especially after meeting one in the forest, whom I dare say you have
met” (57). Anodos is apparently fated to receive this curse, as everything he has done (or been coerced into doing) so far in the narrative has prepared him for its requirements. As a type of sentient shackle, the shadow thereafter corrupts the beauty of Fairy Land like an epistemological plague, transforming the most inspiring vistas into barren wastes and turning its “lovely” inhabitants into “commonplace” people (59-60). In contrast to MacDonald’s other stories and to fairy tales in general, Anodos receives the shadow, not as a gift to aid him in his quest, but as a curse, one that constantly reminds him of the limited perception of the self-conscious will. Like Plato’s cave-dwellers, Anodos cannot see past the puppet theatre of his own constrained consciousness; significantly, his shadow obscures even the sun at one point, which “wither[s] and darken[s] beneath the blow,” indicating the corrupt will’s capacity to distort even the highest, most inviolate of truths (59). When Anodos reaches the Fairy Palace, however, the shadow retreats, presumably because the wonders of the place outweigh even his ability to deconstruct his surroundings. In the palace, Anodos operates like one entranced, drifting from room to room until he rediscovers his ideal in the form of the white lady.

Leading up to and during his stay in the Fairy Palace, Anodos expresses a desire to stop moving, to linger in some particularly beautiful locale or to end the adventure in Fairy Land altogether. Not surprisingly, however, his desire achieves the opposite effect, driving him deeper into his reformative story. Relentlessly following a series of successive streams, creeks, and rivulets, Anodos succumbs to the suggestive beauty of “one gorgeous summer evening” and adds a new inaccessible ideal to his rapidly expanding list: “Could I but see the Spirit of the Earth, as I saw once the indwelling woman of the beech-tree, and my beauty of the pale marble, I should be

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36 See, for comparison, George MacDonald, “Curdie’s Mission” in The Princess and Curdie (London: Penguin, 1966), 60-75. In this chapter, the omniscient grandmother grants Curdie a gift of perception that allows him to see the metaphorical “heart” of each person he meets with but a touch of his hand. Almost the direct opposite of the corrupting shadow, this gift provides a means of cutting through the superficiality of physical appearances to uncover the truth beneath.
content” (65). Unsatisfied with the scattered, ephemeral visions of Fairy Land, Anodos longs for a more substantial knowledge, to witness with his eyes the unknowable forces beyond the reach of human perception. He admits that such knowledge would provide him with contentedness, with the willingness to “cease to be,” which runs counter to MacDonald’s campaign against complacency. However, while the “longing” fostered by Anodos’s ideals remains useful in bringing about his redemption, the ideals themselves are ignes fatui, mirages that disappear with any attempt to touch or realize them. Similar to his desire to “cease” and be “content,” Anodos expresses an explicit wish to be out of Fairy Land and done with his adventures after eating dinner in a room of the Fairy Palace that resembles his own chambers, down to the smallest detail:

    . . . and when at length, wearied with thinking, I betook myself to my own old bed, it was half with a hope that, when I awoke in the morning, I should awake not only in my own room, but in my own castle also; and that I should walk out upon my own native soil; and find that Fairy Land was, after all, only a vision of the night. (70-1)

Anodos fills this passage with expressions of ownership and familiarity: the word “own” occurs four times in one sentence. His half-articulated longing, which MacDonald subsumes with the novel’s familiar water-induced “oblivion,” contains a struggle to regain his sense of power over something, anything, familiar to him, and it also exhibits his ongoing desire to touch something well-known, to “walk out on my own native soil.” Such physical contact reassures and grounds the individual—gives him a sense of proportion and serves as a means by which to mark his progress—but it is exactly what Fairy Land continues to deny Anodos, which may explain his wish to have all of its power reduced to the harmless status of “only a vision of the night.”
During his stay in the Fairy Palace, Anodos delves into books in which his consciousness mingles with that of the main character until their histories are the same; as the primary character in a novel, Anodos’s description of melding with the fictional characters about which he reads introduces a sort of metafictional guide to reading, whereby any *a priori* conceptualizations of selfhood must be dissolved into the readymade character on the page: “With a fiction it was the same. Mine was the whole story. For I took the place of the character who was most like myself, and his story was mine; until . . . I would awake, with a sudden bewilderment, to the consciousness of my present life” (76). Anodos allows his identity to take a hiatus during these forays into the fictional realms, much as MacDonald expects his readers to do during their reading of Anodos’s tale. In fact, the most extended subnarrative within the novel carries this allegorical hermeneutic even further, depicting as it does the tragedy of Cosmo, a lovelorn young man who longs after an ideal beauty he can see only in a magic mirror, and whose “history” corresponds directly with that of Anodos. Cosmo’s ambition, his desire “to live in *that* room” of the mirror, to win the love of the beautiful white lady therein, becomes his undoing. And of course, his greatest sin is an imperial act of volition: he uses magical incantations in an attempt to force the lady out of her mirror and into his room. In short, MacDonald constructs a layered narrative allegory, whereby each story corresponds directly with its reader, like the optical illusion engendered by an infinite reflection. This arrangement operates with the insidious pretext that the reader possesses some unmitigated interpretive power—he “[takes] the place of the character who [is] most like [himself],” after all—but that alleged power disguises the fact

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37 See, for example, *Phantastes*, 66-7.Indulging in some free indirect discourse, MacDonald precedes Anodos’s arrival at the Fairy Palace with an impromptu treatise on inspiration, wherein he affirms that the “unsought feelings of the soul” contain “no cheat” and that “there must be a truth involved” even when “we may but in part lay hold of the meaning.”

38 See *Phantastes*, 99. Even in his arrogance, Cosmo’s spells are ineffective. According to the lady in white, no action he took of his own volition resulted in her appearance; only the unsatisfied longing (which will remain unsatisfied) to see her brought her out of the mirror: “But do not think it was the power of thy spells that drew me; it was thy longing desire to see me, that beat at the door of my heart, till I was forced to yield.”
that the character’s “place” is part of a predetermined structure. Over and again, MacDonald’s fiction offers an illusion of choice—in interpretation for the reader, in action for the characters—only to subsequently dispel the illusion with a reference to a reductive organizational pattern or platitudinous life lesson. Cosmo’s story has no “double meaning,” as Anodos suggests; it has only one meaning, and that meaning reiterates the same reductive homily as the larger narrative: “TOUCH NOT!” Indeed, the most conspicuous rendering of the novel’s denial of volition and prohibition of consummation takes place immediately following Anodos’s account of Cosmo’s story.

Left to his own devices in the palace, Anodos wanders compulsively, unconsciously enacting one of the tenets from Cosmo’s story, the glorification of movement for its own sake, “that relief in constant motion, which is the hope of all active minds when invaded by distress” (96). He soon discovers that he is not alone in the palace, but once again faces a host of indistinct forms that vanish upon his attempt to see them directly. According to Roderick McGillis, among many other critics of MacDonald’s work, Anodos’s desire to see or touch the bizarre, evanescent forms of Fairy Land always symbolizes sexual aggression. When Anodos longs to touch the young maiden’s crystal globe in Chapter IX, for example, he is indulging his more prurient motivations: “Anodos, influenced by his Shadow, sees the globe as a desirable object, something

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39 See, for example, Phantastes, 84. MacDonald repeatedly utilizes the ineffability topos, or poetics of failure, in his descriptions of the books or songs of Fairy Land. Such a technique epitomizes what I have called the illusion of choice in interpretation, for while it hints at some vast, revolutionary significance, it mediates meaning through rigid, limited prose or verse with very obvious interpretive cues and glosses. For instance, in introducing the obviously analogous story of Cosmo and his lady in the mirror, Anodos employs the poetics of failure to temper its stringent allegory with a hint of mystery: “One story I will try to reproduce. But, alas! it is like trying to reconstruct a forest out of broken branches and withered leaves. In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else, I cannot tell. It glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves.”

to gratify his senses; he lusts after it."\textsuperscript{41} However, upon closer examination, one could posit a strikingly different reading of this and other similar passages in the novel: Anodos wants to touch and see clearly the ephemeral shapes and forms around him in order to construct a firm episteme with which to stabilize the surreality of Fairy Land.\textsuperscript{42} In other words, he touches in order to learn, to gain a modicum of empirical knowledge to use as a guidepost in unpacking his future experiences among the inhabitants of this strange world. In the example mentioned above, Anodos wants to touch the globe to learn something more about its powers and capabilities after being denied any explanation by its evasive owner: “I asked her about the globe she carried, and getting no definite answer, I held out my hand to touch it” (61). His desire, as he expresses it himself, is definitively an intellectual one, a “desire to know about the globe,” to “learn anything about the globe” (62). Similarly, his altercation in the Fairy Palace with the veiled statue of his white lady may signify something more complex than a sexual advance; instead, perhaps his furtive embrace of the lifeless statue stems from a desire to know, to culminate the relationship with his figurative Athena, his “Isis,” as he calls her, to gratify the “presence which longed to become visible,” begging for Anodos “to gift it with self-manifestation” and, more significantly, “volition” (110-12).

Anodos sings his white lady into being, much as he did in the marble cave, attempts to imbue her still inert form with life by violating “the law of the place”—the only clear instruction in Fairy Land to date is the dictatorial prohibition “TOUCH NOT!” emblazoned on a lamp in the palace statuary—and once again watches her flee into the distance, uttering imprecations of

\textsuperscript{42} See Michel Foucault, “Preface” in \textit{The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences} (New York: Vintage, 1970), xv-xxiv, xxii. I use the term “episteme” in accordance with Foucault’s original conception, outlined in \textit{Les Mots et les choses} in 1966, which denotes an “epistemological field” that establishes a history of the “conditions of possibility.” Anodos wishes to learn the \textit{episteme} of Fairy Land’s objects and inhabitants so that he may acquaint himself with the laws of their “propinquity,” with the “\textit{tabula} of their relationships and the order by which they must be considered.”
“You should not have touched me!” over her shoulder as she goes. Thereafter, Anodos’s progress assumes the form of “dull endurance” (124), of a plodding determinacy that finally gives way to despair on the shore of the barren sea. Continuously denied any closure to his various enterprises, and condemned for his “Selfishness” in taking an active interest in what seems to be the product of his own artistic labor, he “chooses” to die and fails even in effecting his own self-destruction. Upon his resurrection from the healing waters, Anodos assumes the helpless status of an infant: the quintessential MacDonald stock character, the wise matron, nurses him back to health by “feeding [him] like a baby” and directs his future actions with a series of morally improving exercises. To begin with, she sings the story of Sir Aglovaile to him as he recovers—a cautionary tale about the perils of trying to embrace the ghost of one’s former love that ends with a Perrault-style moral quatrain warning against “A sigh too much, or a kiss too long” (134). She then allows Anodos to relive two of the most traumatic experiences of his life, reminding him of the grief associated with the death of his brother and the bittersweet memories of a former love, and a third experience teaches him the identity of his elusive white lady, whose heart belongs to someone else. When at last Anodos has tried all of the ways out of the old woman’s cottage and returned each time to his point of origin, she insists that he must leave and directs him to the only path available, instructing him as he goes to “do something worth doing” (144).

In the old woman’s cottage, Anodos’s willpower is utterly useless. He tries to explore the island on which the little building stands, only to be thrust into one of the darkest moments of his childhood and then extracted back into the cottage. He then tries to convince the old woman to let him stay, but she commands him to leave, giving him no purpose or explanation, but proffering a perverse condolence without substance: “In whatever sorrow you may be, however
inconsolable and irremediable it may appear, believe me that the old woman in the cottage . . .
knows something, though she must not always tell it, that would quite satisfy you about it, even
in the worst moments of your distress” (144). For Anodos, the implication of this cryptic
assurance is painfully clear: he must forego any hope in securing his own contentedness,
pleasure, or even safety; he must accept his impotence in controlling the affairs of his own
existence and trust in an unknowable significance. He must, in short, abandon his will. He must
believe what he says at the novel’s end, that “good is coming to [him]—that good is always
coming,” but he must never attempt to actively seek it. Good is “always coming,” but it will
never actually arrive. The conditions of life will probably not get better, but he must believe
indefatigably that they will.

“To grow to no end”: Interminable Progress as Virtue in the Fairy Tales

Whereas Anodos learns the harsh, bewildering lesson of self-abnegation by wandering
through various moral tests, which the narrative compels him to undergo against his will,
MacDonald’s child characters receive a much more explicit form of guidance on their journeys
of self-improvement. In an astonishing number of MacDonald’s fairy tales, the reforming agent
takes the form of an old woman, timeless, wise, and beautiful beyond description, who instructs
the children in how they can best proceed through their disorienting surroundings. However, like
the old woman in the cottage in Phantastes, the “wise woman” of the fairy tales reveals nothing
directly; she only hints, outlines, or insinuates. As a result, her impressionable protégés embark
on a quest of ambiguous purpose based solely on the wise woman’s insistence that they must do
as she commands. In such a narrative construction, the telos of the action counts for very little, if
anything. However, MacDonald realizes that every story must possess a telos of sorts, especially
if it proposes any specific moral ideology in its reformation of the characters, so he manufactures an unanswerable question, such as “What is the golden key supposed to unlock?” or “Who is the real princess, Rosamond or Agnes?” These rhetorical questions move the plot along, dragging the characters in their wake, but resolution is never achieved. No one discovers the real meaning, symbolic or otherwise, behind the golden key, and Rosamond and Agnes are both harshly punished by turns until the story’s end, whereupon Rosamond seems to be as near redemption as the wise woman’s tyrannical standards will allow. The disturbing implication of these tales of protracted reform and punishment is that MacDonald’s moral progress, by which I mean the externally mandated behavioral and conceptual reformation of an individual in order to bring her closer to a state of righteousness or grace, can never come to an end. Instead, only those characters willing to continue on indefinitely, without the reassurance of an occasional respite whereby they might review the figurative distance they have traveled, come close to virtue in MacDonald’s fairy tales. Progress itself replaces and transcends any readily discernible goal, and the best souls are those that just keep moving, even when they know nothing of their current location or their future bearing.\(^43\) In the following analysis, I examine two of MacDonald’s fairy tales for children, “The Golden Key” (1867) and “The Wise Woman, or, The Lost Princess: A Double Story” (1874), in an attempt to posit interminable progress—at the expense of individualism and volition—as the central virtue of his fiction. Most, if not all, of MacDonald’s

\(^43\) See Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 7-9. Here I wish to make an important distinction between MacDonald’s moral progress and the sort of secular individual progress advocated by the social philosophers and essayists of the Victorian period. MacDonald’s relentless, compulsory moral reform contrasts sharply with the voluntary, results-oriented ameliorative practices that J. S. Mill sanctions in his lectures and writings, or that Matthew Arnold promotes in *Culture and Anarchy*. Miller explains Mill’s perspective on “moral perfectionism” as a conclusively voluntary desire to imitate one’s ideals, both historical and fictional, in an effort to accomplish a detectable, measurable advance: “Mill presents this perfectionist sentiment as a support to solitary figures in heroic opposition to their society, driven by their isolation backward to the past and forward to posterity, driven out of history altogether and into fiction or divinity, seeking that sustaining sympathy by which Mill finds moral perfectionism propelled. . . . Now we experience such perfection but intermittently and inwardly. But these very intimations, making us better and happier, themselves advance us toward that perfection, drawing us toward that time when the greater evils of life, physical and social, will have been removed.”
writing for children and adults evinces the tendency I am tracing in these two tales, but I contend that they display his preoccupation with endless, depersonalized improvement most conspicuously.

MacDonald’s first collection of fairy tales, *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867), includes three stories from a novel published three years earlier entitled *Adela Cathcart* (1864), in which a group of concerned adults endeavor to assist the eponymous heroine overcome her emotional immaturity by telling her artfully instructive stories, like a modified *One Thousand and One Nights*. These three tales, “The Light Princess,” “The Shadows,” and “The Giant’s Heart,” castigate those who willfully try to deny spiritual truths and existential certainties, though “The Giant’s Heart” does so by means of what U. C. Knoepflmacher rightly terms “an inversion”: the two child heroes of that tale deceive and mutilate their simple giant antagonists in the more traditional manner of the wily adventurer, à la Jack the Giant-Killer, but their triumph resounds with a distinct note of cruelty at the end.44 “The Golden Key,” however, falls into a category of its own, representing what Cynthia Marshall calls MacDonald’s “masterpiece in the fairy tale mode.”45 In it, MacDonald relies only loosely on the stock-in-trade components of the traditional fairy tale, preferring to give himself unrestricted mythopoeic license in the construction of the realm of Faerie. For all of its inventiveness and originality, however, “The Golden Key” exhibits the very same didacticism present in the other tales of the collection, only with an added emphasis on dissolving individuality and ambition.

From its beginning, “The Golden Key” denies its main characters any lasting sense of identity or individuality to better accommodate their lack of reflexivity along the road to moral perfection. Their preferences and desires are either thwarted outright, or they accept the

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mandates of their supernatural guides as substitutes for their own intentions. In a subtle indication of the tale’s dissolution of individual identity and desire, the two child heroes of “The Golden Key” have names assigned to them, other than their true names, which are never revealed. The girl goes by “Tangle” because that is the name the negligent servants in her father’s house have given her in reference to her untidy hair, and the boy is called “Mossy” in accordance with the nickname “his companions” give him due to his tendency to sit and read on a moss-covered rock. Additionally, upon entering the cottage of the “Grandmother,” both Mossy and Tangle bathe and don new clothes, signifying their figurative death to the outside world and their induction into Fairyland, as well as the sloughing off of their previous identities. In another example of the tale’s gradual eradication of individuality, the dress Tangle receives is fashioned to be virtually identical to the old woman’s, “shining like hers, and soft like hers, and going into just such lovely folds from the waist” (126). Similarly, Mossy’s “suit of clothes” makes him look very handsome, but he can no longer perceive his own appearance while wearing his new outfit; his observation is limited to the appearances of others: “But the wearer of Grandmother’s clothes never thinks about how he or she looks, but thinks always how handsome other people are” (130). Like death, the children’s symbolic bathing and dressing occurs abruptly and without their consent, signifying their total lack of control over the process. The point is reiterated in a brief educational aside about the conditions of animal life in Fairyland, where “the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people”: the Grandmother connects the creatures’

47 See MacDonald, “The Golden Key,” 130. The grandmother does put an odd hypothetical question to Tangle before throwing her into the water, asking, “‘You will not be afraid of anything I do with you—will you?’” But, as Tangle’s honest response expresses, such a question cannot possibly be answered confidently: “‘I will try very hard not to be; but I can’t be certain, you know.’”
blind willingness to obliterate themselves to the existential helplessness of all living beings, who “must wait their time, like you and me too” (128).

Without any viable control over their destinies, Tangle and Mossy can only perform the “work” the Grandmother sets them to do, and that work exemplifies the infinite progress at the heart of MacDonald’s narrative ethic. For example, both children follow something enticing into Fairyland—Mossy goes after the golden key at the rainbow’s end, and Tangle follows the strange, iridescent “air-fish” creature—only to possess the source of their enticement in a way that prolongs their matriculation. Mossy finds his key, but not its lock, and Tangle actually eats the “air-fish,” but then watches it fly away in its metamorphosed form moments later. Even on the subtle level of mundane incident, MacDonald’s tale advocates an endless progression, always with simple desire or curiosity as its catalyst, but never with completion or contentedness as the final outcome. Within this structure of what I will call perpetualism, MacDonald informs his tale with both his view of human existence and his most highly valued moral condition, namely patient, active expectancy. As Cynthia Marshall notes, the series of quest renewals in “The Golden Key” offer a model of the Christian life, a template for the worldly pilgrim on his way to heaven: “. . . each time the characters, separately or together, reach a goal . . . the proffered reward is renewal of the quest. The plot may be read as an allegory of human life which reaches fulfillment only in heaven.”48 Such a tidy reading cannot fit “The Golden Key” perfectly, however, since the two pilgrims never actually reach heaven in the story. As he does at the conclusion of Phantastes, where Anodos returns to the human world after experiencing the blissful meditation of death in Fairy Land like Lazarus brought back from the grave, MacDonald refuses his characters any final culmination to their quest in the fairy tale. Tangle and Mossy just

“go on and on” in compliance with the Grandmother’s initial advice, “still climbing” the rainbow’s spiral stairs when the story ends (131, 144).

Why does MacDonald consistently deny his pilgrims any real rest or conclusion to their trials and tribulations? Why are his troubled heroes never allowed even a momentary sense of achievement or satisfaction? As I have suggested above, I contend that MacDonald will not allow his characters any narrative accession because such an event would denote individual accomplishment rather than divine intervention and guidance. No matter how much assistance a character may receive during the course of his adventure—and Tangle and Mossy receive a great deal of assistance from the Grandmother and the Old Men of the Sea, Earth, and Fire—their successful completion of the journey could still legitimately figure as heroic endurance and stalwart faith, and such independence has no place in MacDonald’s Christian theology. In another instance of MacDonald’s reluctance to ascribe even the humblest individual virtue to his characters, Mossy’s trip across the sea toward the rainbow’s end exhibits no intrepid courage or willful endurance, but merely his unconscious imitation of an unseen helper: “Day after day he held on, and he thought he had no guide. He did not see how a shining fish under the waters directed his steps” (142). Significantly, the aquatic guardian does not merely act as Mossy’s protector or occasional counselor, but rather “directed his steps,” indicating its total control over his procession toward the next interval in his never-ending series of goals.

Connecting his characters’ chronic incomprehension to the interpretive struggles of his reader, MacDonald invests the short tale with a metacommentary on its status as a spiritual cipher, anticipating the reader’s impatience with a never-ending series of latent symbols and allegorical episodes. During Tangle’s visit to the Old Man of the Fire, she watches a strange naked child, later revealed to be the venerable being himself, “playing with balls of various
colors and sizes, which he disposed in strange figures on the floor beside him” (139). From watching these balls in their various arrangements, Tangle subliminally acquires an insight into the indescribable significance of the shapes and colors, trusting to their inherent, but ultimately undecipherable, importance: “And now Tangle felt there was something in her knowledge which was not in her understanding. For she knew there must be an infinite meaning in the change and sequence and individual forms of the figures into which the child arranged the balls . . . but what it all meant she could not tell.” The “forms” of the child’s configurations are undoubtedly Platonic ones, fundamental substances or essences from which the whole of perceivable reality derives, but unlike the Platonic philosopher, Tangle cannot comprehend those forms even after their revelation, and neither can the reader of MacDonald’s narrative: the forms remain locked in her “knowledge,” sequestered away from the more active portion of her intelligence, the “understanding.” In this instance, even Augustinian hermeneutics fail to bridge the communicative gap between what is known and what is understood: although poor Tangle may be completely willing to believe in the truth of what she sees, she does not graduate from that belief into comprehension.49

Thus willed progress, at least in terms of spiritual comprehension or moral advance, remains an impossibility in “The Golden Key.” Tangle and Mossy do nothing of their own accord; they simply follow the rigorous path set before them to reach “the country whence the shadows fall”—the sunlit exterior of Plato’s allegorical cave—without ever actually crossing that threshold, or, less metaphorically, without ever comprehending the developmental purport of their own quest. Like the two perpetual pilgrims of “The Golden Key,” the two morally aberrant

49 See, for example, Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 117: “Students of the Holy Scriptures are not only to be admonished that they know the kinds of expression that are used there, and that they observe vigilantly and hold by memory the manner in which things are customarily said there, but also, and this is most important, that they pray for understanding. For in these books concerning which they are studious they read that ‘the Lord giveth wisdom: and out of his mouth cometh prudence and knowledge.’”
young ladies of “The Wise Woman” embark on an unsatisfied quest for perfection, but in contrast to the easy compliance of Mossy and Tangle, Rosamond and Agnes resist their mandatory reformation with every ounce of their not insubstantial wills. The result is a peculiar story of unsuccessful rehabilitation, a failed project in which a tone of bitterness, almost of cynicism, presides. In “The Wise Woman, or, The Lost Princess: A Double Story,” an overlong novella with an overlong title, replete with overlong sentences, frequent digressions, and an inordinate amount of repetition, MacDonald creates perhaps his darkest commentary on the delusional nature of self-motivated progress. Interminability pervades the story like an intentional structural and thematic motif: the initial sentence of its second paragraph rambles on for almost a page, beginning with its setting in “this country of uncertainties” and ending suggestively with the simple clause, “something happened.” The two girls’ compulsory journeys to the wise woman’s cottage drag on for pages, their punishments performed again and again with heavy-handed repetition. And the culmination of this prodigious story’s bitterly angry, obnoxiously didactic events, its denouement after seventy-five pages of egregious, traumatic rehabilitative techniques —ranging from accidental drowning to animal attacks— involves one uncertain future for Rosamond and her afflicted parents and one complete failure in the redemption of Agnes’s character. Nothing is resolved, and no one makes any definite progress; even the story itself, as MacDonald’s smug narrator declares in the final paragraph, is “not finished” (303).

In “The Wise Woman,” MacDonald vehemently attacks self-regard and assessment. His two degenerate heroines epitomize what he terms “self-conceit” or “self-complacency”; that is, 50

50 George MacDonald, “The Wise Woman, or, The Lost Princess: A Double Story” in The Complete Fairy Tales, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher (New York: Penguin, 1999), 225-303, 225-6. All subsequent citations of this story will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically. See also MacDonald, The Complete Fairy Tales, 187. In the headnote to MacDonald’s “Later Tales,” U. C. Knoepflmacher comments on “The Wise Woman’s” unorthodox beginning, noting that it “starts with a never-ending sentence through which MacDonald mocks our expectations of a straight-forward, progressive narrative.”
each of them has the audacity to recognize and admire her own self-image (254-5). As MacDonald reiterates, both girls begin their degradation by establishing this firm sense of individualism; Rosamond grows up believing in the “fundamental, innate, primary, first-born, self-evident, necessary, and incontrovertible idea and principle that she was Somebody” (226), and Agnes “came to believe . . . as the most absolute fact in the universe, that she was Somebody; that is, she became most immoderately conceited” (254). Imbued with far more than mere sarcasm, the caustic narrator’s comments here reveal MacDonald’s increasingly extreme disgust with individualism. Indeed, in a letter to Dr. J. D. Holland in October of 1876—a response to Dr. Holland’s proposition that he send his daughter to stay with the MacDonalds in Scotland for a while for educational purposes—he makes it very clear that what he derisively calls “accomplishments, regarded as a means of display” have no place in his household. Those who wish to learn from the MacDonalds will benefit far more from “the moral and spiritual development” of their activities than from “the merely intellectual.”

Self-consciousness is, for MacDonald, a universal agent of corruption, concealing and distorting the inviolate, transcendent truths of the life before and after our presence on this earth: “As in what we foolishly call maturity, so in the dawn of consciousness, both before and after it has begun to be buttressed with self-consciousness, each succeeding consciousness dims—often obliterates—that which went before, and with regard to our past as well as our future, imagination and faith must step into the place vacated of knowledge.” Thus the “maturity” of the individual mind, its amassing of information about itself and its relationship to others, “obliterates” the mysterious, higher truths “which went before” it became self-aware. In fact, MacDonald insists that only through

52 George MacDonald, “A Sketch of Individual Development,” in *The Imagination and Other Essays* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1883), 43-76, 43.
recognizing the insufficiency of personal “desire,” a consistently derogatory term he substitutes for the less pejorative “volition,” can an individual make “any growth, any progress.”\footnote{MacDonald, “A Sketch of Individual Development,” 46-7. MacDonald provides an even more explicit denouncement of the individual will as “Desire” in this essay, in which invective he refers to it as the “pseudo-will,” motivated only by “impulse” or “selfishness” and always already in conflict with “the existence and force of being higher than his own, recognized as Will . . . .”}

MacDonald’s characters confront this self-abnegation, the total suppression of the ego, as the greatest challenge of their spiritual education, but in “The Wise Woman,” MacDonald uses the process of obliterating self-consciousness to highlight the utter impossibility of advancement under one’s own steam. In the story of Rosamond and Agnes, MacDonald most ruthlessly denounces any and all self-willed action, reducing the moral value of his heroines’ volition to absolute zero.

As is evident in Rosamond’s reformation, MacDonald refuses his characters any acknowledged success in effecting their own moral progress. Instead, in a vicious cycle of perpetual improvement, their momentary self-assessments become mere iterations in an unbroken series of “conceit[s],” and any positive reflection on their advancement only represents the need for more reform. Rosamond, the story’s literal princess, suffers from an excess of spirit. She vacillates among moods with an awful caprice indulged by her parents, becomes overly possessive and avaricious, and finally culminates in a “peevish” existential ennui, “dissatisfied not only with what she had, but with all that was around her, and constantly wishing things in general to be different” (229). In characteristic fashion, MacDonald’s narrative remedy for Rosamond’s uncontrollable behavior is abduction and incarceration. Because Rosamond had “never tried to grow better”—though one could ask how she was to know what “better” might look like, given her indulgent, negligent childhood—she must “be made to mind somebody else than her own miserable Somebody” (229, 233). The “wise woman,” who seems to be something
like a local shaman or guru, comes to the court of Rosamond’s parents, kidnap\[\text{\textsuperscript{54}}\]\]s her, and drags her off to her cottage, while singing a meaningful tune about the sorrows of isolation symbolized in the moon’s solitary flight across the night sky.\[\text{\textsuperscript{54}}\] Upon their eventual arrival at the cottage, which is situated miles from Rosamond’s home in the midst of a wolf- and hyena-infested forest, the wise woman informs the terrified princess that “no one ever gets into my house who does not knock at the door, and ask to come in” (237). Proffering what seems like an opportunity for active choice, the wise woman has in fact presented the girl with an ultimatum: “Either submit and come in, or die alone.” And even when Rosamond finally succumbs to the fear of “that horrible loneliness” brought on by the wise woman’s suggestive song, not to mention the unfamiliar woods around her, with its predatory beasts, she cannot actively enter the cottage because it has no door.

Here, MacDonald makes clever use of what Max Lüthi calls the “ironic” fairy tale motif of “manipulation.”\[\text{\textsuperscript{55}}\] Rosamond believes she is entering the wise woman’s cottage because she has discovered an important moral truth—that her parents love her and she should begin to return their love by following the wise woman’s instructions—but her true motivations are far less indicative of a newfound high-mindedness: “‘Oh, please, let me in!’ said the princess. ‘The moon will keep staring at me; and I hear the wolves in the wood’” (240). Princess Rosamond operates solely as the wise woman’s emotional puppet here, responding to her new guardian’s subliminal moon-song with panicky desperation and fearing an attack by the wolves which the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{54}}\] See George MacDonald, “The Wise Woman,” 233-4. Appropriately, the moon of the wise woman’s song anticipates both Rosamond’s helpless situation outside the remote cottage, where she is “like a castaway clout” and “quite shut out,” and Agnes’s eventual ordeal in the isolation chamber, where she must walk and walk with no landmarks or paths or markers of any kind until she comes very close to losing her mind: “There is never a hut, / Not a door to shut, / Not a footpath or rut, / Long road or short cut, / Leading to anywhere!”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{55}}\] Max Lüthi, \textit{The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man}, trans. Jon Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 131: “Manipulation is not the same as ordering something done; as with irony, it is a matter of indirectness. The behind-the-scenes manipulation turns others into puppets, but in such a way that—and again it is precisely herein that the irony lies—they think they are acting independently and of their own free will.”
wise woman had intentionally left her to face alone during their journey from the palace. Accordingly, MacDonald’s intrusive narrator castigates Rosamond’s hollow actions almost immediately, relegating the princess’s positive self-appraisal once again to the realm of evil conceit, her moral progress diminished to a simple change of “mood”: “... it seemed to her as if her soul had grown larger of a sudden, and she had left the days of her childishness and naughtiness far behind her. People are so ready to think themselves changed when it is only their mood that is changed!” (240). In short, because she thinks she has made personal progress, or “grown good,” Rosamond has achieved nothing at all. Her individuality and self-regard preclude progress completely, which her subsequent dream reveals in striking detail:

She dreamed that she was the old woman up in the sky, with no home and no friends, and no nothing at all, not even a pocket; wandering, wandering forever, over a desert of blue sand, never to get anywhere, and never to lie down or die. It was no use stopping to look about her, for what had she to do but forever look about her as she went on and on and on—never seeing any thing, and never expecting to see any thing! The only shadow of a hope she had was, that she might by slow degrees grow thinner and thinner, until at last she wore away to nothing at all; only alas! she could not detect the least sign that she had yet begun to grow thinner. (241-2)

Rosamond’s nightmare confers the sense of hopelessness the intentional will garners in MacDonald’s fiction, the isolated, disembodied self doomed to wander eternally without “get[ting] anywhere.” Only the promise of self-destruction, of “grow[ing] thinner and thinner” into nothingness, provides any relief from the unrelenting despair of endless, pointless “wandering.” Ironically, the terrible vision conveyed by Rosamond’s dream can be seen as an almost perfect analogue for the alternative quest “to be good and lovely” offered by the wise
woman (282). Like Rosamond’s dream, the wise woman’s interminable quest for perfection disallows rest or “stopping to look about,” lest such an interval lead to an atavistic relapse into conceited stagnation, of “arrogant self-esteem” (263). After all, as MacDonald’s narrator reports, those who only perform their duty sporadically—that is, with any cessation or reflection—become “conceited,” whereas the noble souls who do it unceasingly “would as soon think of being conceited of eating their dinner as of doing their duty” (262).

Like her counterpart in ceaseless reformation, Agnes undergoes a series of grueling tests designed to rid her of the delusion of volitional progress. The first of these ultimately ineffective tests, which William Gray calls “unbelievably harsh,” involves an isolation chamber constructed of glass-like material, “a great hollow sphere” with “neither door, nor window, nor any opening to break its perfect roundness” (259). The wise woman confines Agnes to this chamber, completely naked, for an indeterminate amount of time, where she experiences firsthand the horrible futility of individual volition, or as MacDonald’s narrator puts it, “Her own choice was going to be carried a good deal farther for her than she would have knowingly carried it for herself.” Agnes’s “choice,” her decision to regard herself with an unhealthy admiration, transforms into a cruel parody of willed action in the wise woman’s magic room. Once Agnes begins to move, her prison moves with her, like a massive hamster wheel, rendering each step another useless attempt to move forward: “On and on she went, keeping as much in a straight line as she might, but after walking until she was thoroughly tired, she found herself no nearer out of her prison than before. She had not, indeed, advanced a single step . . . .” (259). In addition to exhausting Agnes with its cruel illusion of motion, which eradicates space, the isolation sphere

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56 See William Gray, “George MacDonald’s Marvelous Medicine” in Fantasy, Myth, and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffman (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2009), 25-60, 56. Gray goes on to say, commenting on Agnes’s initiation into the wise woman’s rehabilitation program, that “Here George MacDonald’s marvelous medicine is bitter indeed.”
deprives Agnes of any sense of time, the other conventional means by which an individual can
determine either her physical or metaphysical progress: “except for weariness, time was for her
no more” (260). This space-time deprivation reduces Agnes to a form of isolation madness,
wherein she sees a monstrous reflection of “her Self, her Somebody” mimicking her every move
until she finally succumbs and “turns sick at herself,” signifying the temporary destruction of her
self-image (261). Incredibly, however, the wise woman’s first words to Agnes upon her
emergence from the sphere discredit any moral evaluation or soul-searching she may have done
and instead stress her lack of genuine improvement: “‘Agnes, you must not imagine you are
cured. That you are ashamed of yourself now is no sign that the cause for such shame has
ceased.’”

Thus improvement never ceases in MacDonald’s narratives because it never truly occurs
at all, especially if the impetus for improvement originates in an individual impulse, desire, or
willed action. When Rosamond’s trials are at long last enough to merit her return home, for
example, the wise woman repeats the same advice she gives to Agnes, emphasizing all the work
the princess has yet to do rather than her progress so far: “‘I saw, through it all, what you were
going to be,’ said the wise woman, kissing her. ‘But remember you have yet only begun to be

57 See Mark Currie, “Inner and Outer Time” in About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 73-86, 79. Here my contention is that the individual in lived time,
or what Paul Ricoeur calls “phenomological time,” compares her awareness of its passage with clock time,
Ricoeur’s “universal” or “cosmological” time, to measure any alterations in her character. That is, as Rosamond
announces early on in her stay with the wise woman, time functions as a sort of monitor or gauge for assessing one’s
progress: “‘How good I was all yesterday!’ she said, ‘and how hungry and ill used I am to-day!’” (251), or “Oh!
how different I am from what I used to be!” (285). When clock time is taken away, however, as it is in Agnes’s
isolation chamber, the remaining lived time has no point of comparison with which to provide any information on
her essential change. The result is a complete collapse of linear temporality, causing a multiplicity of perceived
selves to emerge and cohabitate the eternal present. Thus the appearance of the malformed “naked child” that Agnes
sees “all at once, on the third day” (as measured by the narrative’s clock time) represents the beginning of what
Lacan would have diagnosed as schizophrenia, or Agnes’s lived relationship with her past and potentially future
self, externalized and objectified in an attempt to fill the gap left by the disappearance of “cosmological” time:
“Deleuze, Guattari and Jameson, for example, have linked the concept of time-space compression to the condition of
schizophrenia, where the latter is understood in a Lacanian sense, as the collapse of temporal order into
silmultaneity.”
what I saw” (294). Here, the power to effect real change lies not with Rosamond, but with the wise woman’s prognostication. Any moral progress Rosamond might experience, and she apparently experiences precious little in this “not finished” story of inchoate reformation, comes to her from a force outside of her control. After all, as MacDonald’s narrator continuously remarks, “the least atom of conceit is a thing to be ashamed of,” and the ultimate goal for all who would be virtuous is to be “made humble” and to “[begin] at once to grow to no end” (254).

“Following something”: Obedience v. Initiative in Lilith

As MacDonald’s final novel, Lilith offers an important glimpse into the theology of its increasingly proselytic author after a lifetime of refining the tenets of his apocatastatic vision. On the surface, the fantasy works as MacDonald’s denunciation of simple materialism, as an edict on the pervasiveness of the supernatural realm and its characteristically topsy-turvy or surreal operational parameters. After all, much of the recent critical work written on Lilith tends to focus on the text’s alleged preoccupation with liminality, with the interpenetration of the material and spiritual realms. While these are undoubtedly relevant approaches to the novel, I focus on its preoccupation with demonizing the individual will, achieved at least partially in the

58 See MacDonald, “The Wise Woman,” 271. MacDonald’s narrator appraises Rosamond’s progress succinctly midway through her series of trials, emphasizing her lack of agency in accomplishing any moral improvement she may have undergone thus far in the narrative: “But if she had not gained much, a trifle had been gained for her . . . .” See also MacDonald, “The Wise Woman,” 303. In an artificial dialogue with his reader near the story’s end, MacDonald once again affirms the impossibility of bringing his tale of infinite progress to a satisfactory conclusion. Interestingly, he also insinuates the potentially limitless implications of his prose on those wise enough to read with more than “their foreheads”: “If you think it is not finished—I never knew a story that was. I could tell you a great deal more concerning them all, but I have already told more than is good for those who read but with their foreheads, and enough for those whom it has made look a little solemn, and sigh as they close the book.”

59 See Rolland Hein, George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker (Nashville: Star Song, 1993), 386. Apparently, MacDonald became acutely distressed when his own wife, Louisa MacDonald, could not comprehend the moral or theological subtext in her husband’s new book: “His apprehension increased when Louisa read the manuscript. She was distressed that she could not understand it, and her inability alarmed him. Perhaps his powers were indeed waning, or the intricacies of his vision were too obscure.”

deconstruction of personal identity and those epistemological tools whereby identity is forged, and the prevention of self-motivated progress, or as I term it here, initiative, through an uncompromising insistence on the incommunicability of moral truth. The impossibility of communicating by means of the worn-out shell of language, coupled with the unreliability of empirical evidence gleaned through the senses and evaluated in the reflecting consciousness, precludes progress of the secular, Victorian variety, forcing Mr. Vane and Lilith to adopt the hegemonic mysticism of Adam and Eve in substitution of their reason. Moreover, in this novel, MacDonald departs most dramatically from the tradition of mainstream Protestantism, as it was expressed in the Evangelical revival of the nineteenth century. Instead of encouraging an interpretation of symbolic events, moral teachings, or eternal truths based on a delicate combination of human understanding and divine guidance, the thematic ramifications of Lilith render any individual effort at comprehension not only futile, but also potentially corruptive. From the outset of the narrative, Mr. Vane repeatedly hears how little he knows or ever will know about the true nature of the world beyond the mirror. His consistent lack of comprehension leads to an artificial dilemma at the novel’s end, namely, whether his perception of the “fantasia” is subjective or objective: “I know not whether these things rise in my brain, or enter it from without. I do not seek them; they come, and I let them go” (252). Of course, both the phrasing of this deceptively ambiguous passage—“I do not seek them; they come” certainly seems to

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61 See David Newsome, “Looking Beyond” in The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspection in an Age of Change (London: John Murray, 1997), 191-230, 193: “Evangelicalism, because of its highly personal nature and its Bible-centered Christianity, was essentially the religion of the home. Tractarianism, by contrast, was a religion of the Church. Its emphasis on the priestly function, respect for liturgy and the centrality of the sacraments seemed to invert the priorities of the Evangelicals. Newman had the deepest and most reverential appreciation of the role of the Scriptures, but his insistence that the Scriptures must be understood in accordance with the teachings of the Church was an assertion that no Evangelical, in his heart of hearts, could really accept.” I am suggesting here that MacDonald’s fiction, with its advocacy of a total acquiescence of spiritual understanding and its emphasis on the performance of externally mandated works as an indispensable component of salvation, bears a more striking resemblance to the High Church pseudo-Catholicism of Newman’s theology than it does to the dominant Protestantism of the nineteenth-century Evangelicals.
indicate an objective source for Vane’s visions—and personified Hope’s instructive comments suggest that Vane’s “dark self” has produced nothing of value: “When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of that dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it” (251). As he does in Phantastes and the fairy tales, though with the added intensity of a man who knows he is nearing the end of his career, MacDonald expresses in Lilith an unmitigated condemnation of individualism, and in doing so, he repudiates initiative as a viable means to moral development or spiritual wisdom.

As the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat dissolve space-time into a meaningless, homogenized mass in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), so too does the raven abolish the conventions of space-time in “the strange land” beyond the mirror in Lilith. When Mr. Vane (ironically named for his distinct lack of direction) asks the raven for some clue as to his location, the sagacious bird replies, “‘You know nothing about whereness. The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home’” (13). In other words, the spatial configuration of the raven’s world remains inaccessible to the uninitiated; once a traveler has embraced the realm’s ideology, then he can be made privy to its geography, but not the other way around. Similarly, time has little bearing on the events of the raven’s world, as he readily admits: “‘There is no hurry,’ said the raven . . . ‘we do not go much by the clock here’” (24). However, whereas the agents of chaos in Wonderland stop short of wholly denying Alice her status as an individual, the raven begins Mr. Vane’s reeducation with an impromptu lecture on the impossibility of self-knowledge, which leads to Vane’s plaintive question, “Indeed, who was I?” (14). “‘If you know you are yourself,’” the raven subversively remarks, “‘you know that you are not somebody else; but do you know that you are yourself? Are you sure you are not your own father?—or, excuse me, your own fool?’” As a non-individual or mock individual, that is
“[his] own fool,” Vane ceases to possess the power to challenge any of the precepts or ideologies that the raven will set forth in the following pages; after all, if he lacks the basic ability to distinguish his identity from any other, then how can he claim to disagree with anything he is told? More bluntly, the authorities of this other realm deny the validity of self-consciousness, thereby preventing Mr. Vane from exercising his reason in evaluating the evasive half-truths of Mr. Raven’s conversation: “‘In fact, nobody is himself, and himself is nobody’” (15).

Completing his invective against Vane’s illusory notions of identity and volition with an active demonstration of his contempt for free will, the raven forcibly removes the unwitting hero from his estate, drawing him into his garden and then on into the other realm for the commencement of his redemption. Although Vane states decisively, “‘I do not want to go,’” the imperious raven responds with the narrative force of MacDonald’s theology, “‘That does not make any difference—at least not much’” (19). When Vane realizes that he has been conscripted into the raven’s service, he bucks at the act’s affront to his will, but the raven makes the dismissive observation that he actually had nothing of the kind to begin with:

    I looked behind me, and gave a cry of dismay; I had but that moment declared I would not leave the house, and already I was a stranger in the strange land!
    “What right have you to treat me so, Mr. Raven?” I said with deep offence. “Am I, or am I not, a free agent?”
    “A man is as free as he chooses to make himself, never an atom freer,” answered the raven.
    “You have no right to make me do things against my will!”
    “When you have a will, you will find that no one can.” (21)
The raven’s reasoning remains incontrovertible throughout the succeeding exchange. The gist of his argument condemns the human will to perfidy and relegates individuality to a permanent state of becoming, where the room for improvement always exceeds the progress made.62 Vane cannot “choose to make himself” any freer than he is at the novel’s beginning; his only choice is to accept the raven and his wife’s instructions as coming ex cathedra and obey their every command.63 And of course, once Vane has succumbed to total obedience, no one can compel him to do anything against his newfound “will” because he “wills” only to obey.64 Initiative accomplishes nothing in MacDonald’s fantasy realms because the narratives’ ideological paradigm denies volition any redeeming value and redefines individuation as learning to think of all self-motivation as inherently evil or vacuous. However, while Vane’s arduous amelioration certainly reflects this central component of MacDonald’s ideology, Lilith’s compulsory conversion reveals the darker side of a narrative ethic based on anti-individualism and the annihilation of free will.

MacDonald begins his narrative’s complete subordination of Lilith’s will by denying her a central role in what could be the inspiring story of her salvation. In the novel that bears her name, Lilith has comparatively little to do or say in the text. Vane is undoubtedly the novel’s protagonist, as it is his adventures that occupy the narrative center and his trials that teach the novel’s primary lesson. Lilith could be the antagonist; she certainly opposes Vane’s endeavors and threatens the stability of Adam and Eve’s moral hegemony. However, as the novel advances

62 See MacDonald, Lilith, 21. Vane goes on to accuse the raven of wronging him “in the very essence of [his] individuality,” but the raven assures him that he is no individual, only a pilgrim on the road to a prescribed, objectively determined individuality of the ever-distant future: “‘If you were an individual I could not, therefore now I do not. You are but beginning to become an individual.’”
63 It should be noted that the raven and his wife are revealed to be Adam and Eve during the course of the narrative. Thus their spiritual authority automatically supersedes any learning or belief held by any of the other characters in the novel by virtue of their proximity to primordial bliss.
64 See George MacDonald, Unspoken Sermons (Series Two) (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), 154: “Will is God’s will, obedience is man’s will; the two make one.”
toward its pseudo-apocalyptic conclusion, Lilith assumes a more allegorical purpose; she exists in the novel merely to demonstrate the inevitability of the surrender of the will or to distract Vane from Adam and Eve’s spiritual curriculum, which teaches an enforced renunciation of initiative in favor of unquestioning obedience. Any effort on Vane’s part to extend kindness to Lilith results in disaster: his admirably selfless decision to nurse her back to health leads to the battle that kills several of the innocent children, the “Little Ones” he spends so much of the story trying to help. After finding her shrunken, insensate corpse in the forest, Vane tends to Lilith for three months, arduously assisting in her convalescence and unknowingly giving of his own blood while he sleeps. Lilith’s vampiric sustenance revives her, but she shuns Vane in disgust, claiming that he has committed “the two worst of wrongs” against her: “compelled [her] to live, and put [her] to shame” (108). In other words, Vane has usurped her volition. He resurrected her from near death and nursed her like a helpless child, but neither of these acts did Lilith desire of him.

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65 See Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 20. Woloch argues that the secondary, or “minor,” characters of the novel often acquire an artificial, allegorical “flatness” in order to provide the central protagonist with the “character-space” needed to advance the novel’s ideology or basic theme: “Flatness simultaneously renders subordinate characters allegorical and, in its compelling distortions, calls attention to the subordination that underlies allegory.” Lilith’s peripheral status in the narrative, even her impersonal textual referent, “the princess,” reduces her to little more than a living allegory on the woes of initiative and individuality, which in turn adds some unexpected poignancy to her abduction and obligatory conversion.

66 See Stephen Prickett, “Adults in Allegory Land: Kingsley and MacDonald” in *Victorian Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 150-197, 182. Prickett notes the total failure of Vane’s initiative, but he insists on some vague “greater redemption” gained through the act, which he characterizes as a “felix culpa,” though he neglects to outline the particulars of the fault’s happy outcome: “Mr. Vane (and here his name is clearly allegorical) wishes to help the innocent children find water . . . but he is told that in order to do so he must first sleep in Mr. Raven’s house—an invitation, in short, to death. Not unnaturally, from a human point of view, he is less than keen on such practical metaphysics (whose reason is never clearly explained) and he attempts to help them on his own initiative. The result is both splendid and tragic. He fails, but through disaster learns wisdom, and finally new opportunities; his sin is a felix culpa, permitting an even greater redemption.” Vane’s “new opportunities” amount to little more than a trip to the very threshold of God’s throne room, where he is thrust abruptly back into his own world, bewildered as to the significance of his “waking” and to the purpose of his journey through the strange land.
Vane’s subsequent pursuit of Lilith as she returns to her kingdom demonstrates the weakness and misguidance of his will. He follows her like a spurned hound, begging to be allowed to bear witness to her beauty even as she continues to drain his blood:

“Down!’ she cried imperiously, as to a rebellious dog, “Follow me a step if you dare!”

“I will!” I murmured, with an agonized effort. (111)

This is where Vane’s initiative has led him, into the abusive embrace of a parasitic monster who hates him for his acts of kindness. Together, the two of them embody both halves of MacDonald’s criticism of the unregulated human will: Lilith is the personification of prideful obstinacy, and Vane allows his moody impressionability to dictate his capricious actions like a child.67 Even in his feeble state, Vane blindly pursues his “will” to his own and to others’ detriment, and Lilith’s proud obstinacy—symbolized by her deformed, clutched fist, which conceals an unknown object she refuses to yield—nearly leads to her destruction when she falls under Lady Mara’s spell and ends up a frozen corpse on the forest floor, to which situation she claims to have arrived “by sheer force of will” (131). Thus, in Lilith as in all of his works of fantasy, MacDonald’s characters repeatedly fail to achieve anything but disaster through actions of their own initiation. Progress is only attainable through total obedience to what Lady Mara, daughter of Adam and Eve, calls “a light that goes deeper than the will, a light that lights up the darkness behind it,” which can paradoxically invalidate the will and redeem it simultaneously: “. . . that light can change your will, can make it truly yours and not another’s—not the Shadow’s”

67 See George MacDonald, Lilith, 200. Lilith conveys her obduracy during her conversion, defiantly clinging to her self-image in the face of intense pain and suffering: “‘What I choose to be you cannot change. I will not be what you think me—what you say I am!’” See also George MacDonald, God’s Word to His Children (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1887), 128. In a candid passage, MacDonald declares his unmitigated denunciation of human volition, which he sees as a pathetic thing, swayed by practically any passing stimulus: “For God’s sake, do not cling to your own poor will. It is not worth having. It is a poor, miserable, degrading thing to fall down and worship the inclination of your own heart, which may have come from any devil, or from any accident of your birth, or from the weather, or from anything.”
But the progress that comes with obedience to Mara’s “light” is an endless path, one that provides no landmarks or destinations, only an infinite quest in search of something unattainable.

*Lilith* ends with the same ambiguity and obtuseness as the rest of MacDonald’s body of work, with the singular difference that he seems to celebrate its unresolved tensions through the medium of Vane’s confusion. Simply put, the novel culminates in Lilith’s ambivalent conversion and in Vane’s complete incomprehension of the purport or validity of his visions. Lady Mara forces Lilith to submit herself to Adam and the House of Death, where she retains at least a vestige of her old pride, refusing to answer his greeting. Her gnarled hand never unclasps its mysterious contents, so Adam must amputate the hand at the wrist. And Lilith’s parting words hardly seem the testimony of the joyful proselyte: “‘I have struggled in vain; I can do no more. I am very weary, and sleep lies heavy upon my lids’” (218). Thereafter, Lilith’s part in the story is complete. Her iron will, subjected to abduction, torture, and shame, dissolves into silent repose.

Vane’s destiny, however, extends his aimless wandering indefinitely. He awakes from his couch in the House of Death alone, believes the resurrection to have come and gone without him, and hurries after his “living dead,” vowing to “follow and follow until [he] came where they had gone!” He admits to being without direction, but such obstacles fail to weaken his resolve to “go and go” (233). Upon learning from Adam that he is in fact still asleep, he begs to be told how he can discern the dreams from the reality, and Adam gives him an intimidating, convoluted answer: “‘Do you not understand?’ he returned . . . ‘You cannot perfectly distinguish between the true and the false while you are not yet quite dead; neither indeed will you when you are quite dead—that is, quite alive, for then the false will never present itself’” (234). Without the ability to classify his ontological position, Vane cannot possibly progress to a higher state, spiritual or otherwise; after all, his ignorance prevents his awareness of the quality of his
existence, which by extension suggests that it prevents his awareness of any change in that quality as well. Vane knows not whether he is “dead” or “alive,” dreaming or awake. Afterwards, Vane takes nothing but his lack of discernment home with him, when the hand of God shoves him back into the narrow confines of his library. As an almost palpable jibe at the futile narrow-mindedness of human knowledge, MacDonald’s climactic ending among the clouds surrounding God’s throne disintegrates into the banality of Vane’s bookshelves. And in the final chapter, which is tantalizingly entitled “The ‘Endless Ending,’” Vane debates the verity of “strange dim memories, which will not abide identification” and resolves to “wait” (252). Nothing tangible survives Vane’s transition back into the humdrum world of his lonely library, nor does anything metaphysical, eternal truth or spiritual wisdom, seem to have come back unscathed. The implication is that Vane is still in training, still on the path to true understanding, or as William Raeper writes, “always arriving, always waiting, always learning.” Vane’s passivity has overcome his foolish initiative; he will do nothing but sit and wait for something to happen because that is what he has been instructed to do.

MacDonald’s narratives thus preach the gospel of obedience and passive expectancy. The individual free will cannot accomplish even the slightest of tasks without impeding or corrupting the progress of the soul toward its inexorable salvation. Anodos is only “pathless” so long as he attempts to make his own way through Fairy Land; once he literally abandons the will to live, the wise woman appears and tells him where to go and what to do. Rosamond fails every test the wise woman administers until she finally renounces her individuality and embraces her teacher’s endless quest: “‘I am very tired of myself . . . But I can’t rest till I try again’” (288). Agnes never understands the wise woman’s lessons or allows her will to be permanently subdued, so she and her mother are cast into outer darkness to contemplate the “pale-hearted disgrace” she has

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become, while her father simply abandons them (302). Lilith succumbs to the brutality of her converters, though her reformation is hardly voluntary or even conscientious, and Mr. Vane exchanges his reason for an inexplicable series of potential dreams and a vague hope that, as Novalis says in the novel’s final sentence, his life “should and will perhaps become” a dream similar to the one he may have experienced in the land beyond the mirror (252). Unfulfilled hopes and partially assimilated spiritual truths proliferate ad infinitum, rendering all moral improvement suspect and all notions of progress moot. MacDonald’s inconclusive tales extirpate volition and replace it with a sort of hopeless hopefulness, a longing for something ambiguously “good” that is “always coming” but never here.

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69 See Robert A. Collins, “Liminality in Lilith,” 13. It should be noted that even the novel’s admirers find its ending problematic and obfuscating. Collins claims the concluding chapter possesses “an air of didactic failure on some level” and admits that even his analytical premise of liminality “fails to solve ultimately the mythopoetic problem: what is the mythic significance of the ‘endless ending’?” See also Athenaeum, Vol. 106 (9 Nov. 1895), 639. Lilith’s detractors were more direct, especially the anonymous reviewer for the renowned Athenaeum, who labeled the narrative “incoherent and grotesque” and opined, “That some high purpose pervades this strange mystical farrago we are willing to believe, but its method of presentment seems to be neither lucid nor edifying.”
CHAPTER III

GETTING NOWHERE FAST: PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT IN CARROLLIAN NARRATIVE

I know I should have to get through the Looking-Glass again—back into the old room—and there’d be an end of all my adventures!

— Alice, *Through the Looking-Glass*

When Alice utters this sentence, not far into the course of her journey through the Looking-Glass Country, she articulates one of the nineteenth-century hero’s primary concerns, the need to make measurable progress. In his popular lecture series, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), Thomas Carlyle redefined heroism for his modern, industrialized society through a series of historical and mythological examples. His sweeping treatment of the subject, dividing heroic types into a taxonomy of his own somewhat arbitrary designation, nevertheless bridged the gap between the Hegelian concept of the “Great Men” —the synthesizers of history’s dialectic polarities—and the social improvement theory of Comtean positivism.¹ Carlyle’s heroes were preeminently workers, contributors to “Universal History” whose thoughts and desires created “whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or to

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¹ For Hegel’s definition of “historical men,” whom he alternatively terms “Heroes,” see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 30: “Such are all great historical men—whose own particular aims involve those large issues which are the will of the World-Spirit. They may be called Heroes, inasmuch as they have derived their purpose and their vocation, not from the calm, regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order; but from a concealed fount—one which has not attained to phenomenal, present existence—from that inner Spirit, still hidden beneath the surface, which, impinging on the outer world as on a shell, bursts it in pieces. . . . They are men, therefore, who appear to draw the impulse of their life from themselves; and whose deeds have produced a condition of things and a complex of historical relations which appear to be only their interest, and their work.” And for an elucidation of the social aspect of Comte’s philosophy, see Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Strowbridge (New York: Dover, 1967), 350-4: “The basis for positive knowledge is the existence of a sufficient social authority. And this reinforces the historical character of positivism; Comte says that the system which explains the past will be master of the future. In this way, by historical continuity and social equilibrium, Comte’s political lemma can be realized: ordre et progrès; order and progress. . . . On [Comte’s relativism] is founded positive philosophy’s capacity for progress, and thus the possibility of changing and improving not only the condition of man, but, above all, his nature.”
attain.”2 These men, or masculine deities, were not only responsible for great individual achievements, but also served as the impetus of history itself, the driving force behind the movement of whole civilizations through time. Thus the nineteenth-century hero transformed from one who merely answers the call of fate or destiny—the epic hero like Achilles, Charlemagne, or Beowulf—into one who actually generates that destiny out of himself, like Napoleon. Decisive action, the vibrancy of the moment, what the more experimental modernists would come to call the “vortex,” becomes the immeasurable power for change that supersedes all others, and in order to retain any claim to heroic status, the modern hero—a sort of temporal Atlas with the weight of all time on his shoulders—must repress and renounce all proclivities to contentedness and move onward.

Heroic Alice, likewise, cannot retrace her steps at any point in her narrative. Carroll even builds the inevitability of forward movement into the chessboard allegory of Through the Looking-Glass (1871): Alice begins as a pawn, a piece forbidden backward movement on the board. Alice is certainly not alone in her compulsory progress; hundreds of other characters in Victorian poetry and fiction spend their time moving around, sometimes simply wandering from place to place, but in all cases shunning complacency and idleness, which represent the cardinal sins of Victorian society. However, as I suggest, Carroll’s narratives reveal an almost morbid preoccupation with the irresistible passage of, to use Paul Ricoeur’s terms, both phenomological and cosmological time, and they implicitly criticize open-ended progress as a goal in itself.3 As Carroll would have been well aware, this emphasis on continuous movement as the path to virtue is particularly pervasive in children’s literature of the period, wherein naughty princesses and

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wayward princes undergo their rehabilitation by following complex directions, working feverishly to make something, or undertaking a long journey, typically against their will. And although some critics posit this type of movement as incidental to the supposedly more significant internal “consciousness” of the characters in nineteenth-century fiction, I contend that the explicit action of many Victorian heroes, particularly those in works of children’s fiction, externalizes their anxiety (as well as their author’s) over remaining unproductive. Some characters, like Alice, perform their actions entirely within the scope of their own “consciousness,” so the oft-discussed internalization of Victorian fiction need not preclude the equally revealing analysis of provisionally external character action in the narrative.

In addition to their insistence on constant movement, the otherworldly characters in Carroll’s stories offer their heroes numerous admonitions for behavioral reformation. Carroll’s central characters often perform a series of tasks to demonstrate their willingness to improve morally or socially, and the beings who insure their compliance with this mandate of amelioration are typically those denizens of the realm of Faërie—sometimes actual fairies, as in *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889), and sometimes one of a variety of other supernatural creatures—who exist either completely outside or on the uncertain edges of the flow of time. These beings usually insist on total obedience from Alice, meeting resistance of any kind with abandonment or

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4 Although an exhaustive list would be almost impossible to compile, I should note a few representative pieces of such works: F. E. Paget’s *The Hope of the Katzekopfs; Or, the Sorrows of Selfishness* (1846), Frances Browne’s *Granny’s Wonderful Chair* (1856), Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1863), Mark Lemon’s *Tinykin’s Transformation* (1869), Dinah M. M. Craik’s “The Little Lame Prince and His Travelling Cloak” (1875), and Lucile L. Clifford’s *Anyhow Stories, Moral and Otherwise* (1882).

5 See, for example, Stefanie Markovits,* The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 1-9. Markovits argues for a general passivity in Victorian fiction, including a perceptible shift from Aristotelian “character” to Wordsworthian “consciousness,” in order to support her assertion that the anxiety over action in most Victorian literature manifests not as external movement, but as thoughtful “reaction.” My contention, however, remains that the activity itself, an element Markovits sublimates to what she dubs “the perceived state of action,” is an indication of the historical perspective on heroism as simple movement for its own sake.

6 Among numerous others, cf. the Caterpillar in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, who instructs Alice to keep her temper while he infuriates her with his incessant contradictions.
insult. Yet in the face of bewildering environments, where very little operates in accordance with
the rules of reality and where nothing is explained, Carroll’s characters soldier on, keep the faith,
and nurture a hope for an eventual reward to be attained through their hard work and ceaseless
progress toward an unknown goal. This hope, what Ernst Bloch described as a continual
astonishment over the potentialities of individual development, denotes a sort of religion of
progress, a faith in the possibility of unforeseen and totally unknowable improvements in the
future. Because Alice believes she will be queen in the Eighth Square, she continues to move
forward through her “adventures,” but her actual reign as queen means next to nothing: she
learns nothing about being queen in the Looking-Glass Country, and she has no control over
events even when she wears the crown. Like myriad other young characters in Victorian
children’s literature, Alice works very hard to achieve very little, but the true virtue of her
heroism lies in her willingness to move, to advance or adventure through her narrative. Carroll’s
worlds are temporal whirlpools where past and present intermingle and events often occur out of
order, disrupting causal relationships and rendering experiential learning insupportable. I argue
that the narratives’ intentional anachronism, along with their problematic portrayal of progress
toward an unknown or deceptive goal, subverts Carlyle’s theory of performative heroism and
reveals Carroll’s uneasy exploration of the Victorian doctrine of historical progress and moral

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7 See Fredric Jameson, “Ernst Bloch and the Future” in Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 123: “Bloch refuses the “metaphysical question” as Heidegger formulates it (‘Why is it that there is something, rather than nothing at all?’), inasmuch as for him being is precisely incomplete, in process, not as yet altogether there: what astounds is therefore not so much being itself, but rather the latency of being-to-come at work, the signs and foreshadowings of future being.”
8 See Lewis Carroll, “Through the Looking-Glass,” in Alice in Wonderland, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 191. In fact, her first official act as queen is a self-deposition: she removes her crown in an attempt to discover what is resting on her head.
9 Here I am playing on the Latin root for the English word “progress,” which is progressus, meaning “an advance.” And “adventure” here means the taking of a risk, the running of an experiment with no discernible outcome; I believe this is the correct denotation of the word as Alice uses it in the epigraph above.
amelioration. Progress, while ostensibly inevitable, is not an absolute good in Carroll’s books, and acts of self-determining independence are few and far between.

Alice’s experiences in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass Country—imaginary realms that are undoubtedly related as they share certain characters in common and yet very distinct in their ontological regulations of behavior—gradually confirm the absolute futility of any attempt at intellectual or moral improvement, even as the strange creatures she meets continue to tell her how to improve herself. Gillian Avery has suggested, quite correctly, that Alice’s flubbed recitations of traditional schoolroom poetry and her dubious geological estimations during her fall down the rabbit-hole undermine the intellectual certainty of her lessons by conflating them with the constant stream of nonsense proffered by the inhabitants of her fantasy land: “However far Alice wanders through Wonderland or Looking-Glass Country, she is constantly reminded of things she has learned, but always in a gloriously muddled way, which makes the real subjects seem equally nonsensical.”

However, the narrative ramifications of such a muddle remain somewhat more disheartening than glorious: no matter how much Alice may learn during her adventures, she can never make any real use of her experiential knowledge. Wonderland undulates in a state of perpetual logical flux, wherein the rigid, intractable rules of one minute become the unmitigated taboos of the next. During Alice’s painfully disorienting exchange with the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, for example, she is subjected to the absurdity of the Lobster-Quadrille, followed by a series of the most infuriating puns, and then commanded to recite an old British schoolroom standard from Isaac Watts’s *Divine Songs for Children* (1715), entitled “The Sluggard.” When she instead recites an extemporaneous poem about a lobster, no doubt influenced by the Lobster-Quadrille she has just heard, the Gryphon criticizes her accuracy and

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the Mock Turtle calls it “uncommon nonsense,” whereupon Alice collapses in despair: “Alice said nothing: she had sat down with her face in her hands, wondering if anything would ever happen in a natural way again.”11 “Natural,” for Alice, signifies continuity, the ability to predict what will come next based on one’s prior experiences. But in Wonderland, such continuity exists only in short bursts, like the almost rational rules of the Mad Hatter’s tea table, and cannot be relied upon for assistance in achieving any sort of tenable goal. Without continuity, intellectual improvement is impossible; Alice cannot hope to understand the workings of Wonderland via observation or conventional reason. Instead, she must simply endure the ordeal. She must progress for the sake of progressing until she finally confronts the futility of the enterprise and brings about an end to her dream.

Here in Wonderland, in its inchoate form, lies the nihilistic subjectivism that J. Hillis Miller posits as one of the defining forms of Victorian literature. Alice’s final lesson, if one can call it that, teaches her to dismiss teleology as impossible, to reject the notion that she will benefit from her adventures and to simply live them. When the Mock Turtle instructs Alice to explain her existential dilemma, the Gryphon interrupts with his (perhaps ironic) comment on the priority of progress: “‘No, no! The adventures first,’ said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: ‘explanations take such a dreadful time’” (82).12 In his discussion of the Nietzschean death of God concept, Miller affirms that when there exists no sustainable external authority, standard of behavior, or ultimate goal in human existence, all that remains is the journey itself: “After this catastrophe, as the sense of exhilarating freedom begins to wear off, man wanders ‘backward, sideways, forwards, in all directions,’ through an ‘infinite nothingness’ which is both within him

11 Lewis Carroll, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” in Alice in Wonderland, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 82-3. All subsequent quotations from Carroll’s Alice books will be taken from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically.
12 Alice’s “existential dilemma” consists of her confession that “it’s no use going back to yesterday, because [she] was a different person then,” which serves as another iteration of her irreversible forward movement.
and without.” Alice undergoes just such an ambivalent journey in both of Carroll’s books, confronting the inherent meaninglessness of her progress even as she continues to spur herself on through the mediation of the characters of her dream. There is no definite purpose to Alice’s adventures, yet she is so imbued with the Victorian doctrine of progress, as was her neurotic author, that she continues to move forward toward an unknown end with alacritous speed.

Charles L. Dodgson, alias Lewis Carroll, was consumed with thoughts on time and mortality. His diaries contain numerous resolutions outlining his future plans for professional and personal improvement, while assertions that life itself was merely a “shadow” or “dream” appear regularly in his correspondences. In his digressively homiletic preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*, he dwells on the inevitability of death and its accompanying eradication of the paltry affairs of this life:

…with youth, good health, and sufficient money, it seems quite possible to lead, for years together, a life of unmixed gaiety—with the exception of one solemn fact, with which we are liable to be confronted at any moment, even in the midst of the most brilliant company or the most sparkling entertainment. . . . [a man] cannot defer, for one single moment, the necessity of attending to a message, which may come before he has finished reading this page, ‘This night thy soul shall be required of thee.’

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15 See *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Morton N. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1:463. In an 1882 letter to an unknown recipient, Dodgson writes, “I find that as life slips away (I am over fifty now), and the life on the other side of the great river becomes more and more the reality, of which this is only a shadow, that the petty distinctions of the many creeds of Christendom tend to slip away as well…”

Carroll’s simultaneous emphasis on the immediate and eventual possibility of death pervades this passage: one’s final breath is a “solemn fact” that can come “at any moment,” maybe even “before [one] has finished reading this page.” Each successive moment represents an inevitable step toward the grave, the dark threshold from which no sojourner returns, just as each of Alice’s encounters represents her inexorable progress toward an unknown end and reminds her of the tenuous, potentially arbitrary nature of her existence. Life, for Carroll, means movement toward a death that could arrive at any time, which view could be described as something of a temporal paradox, conflating as it does the diachronic linear form of life as history and the synchronic cyclical form of life as imminent death. In a later passage from the same preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*—a work Carroll characterized as more didactic in content than either of the Alice books—Carroll seems to articulate his own version of the doctrine of progress, though his vision extends beyond the temporal restrictions of life into eternity:

> But, once realize what the true object is in life—that it is not pleasure, not knowledge, not even fame itself, ‘that last infirmity of noble minds’—but that it is the development of character, the rising to a higher, nobler, purer standard, the building up of the perfect Man—and then, so long as we feel that this is going on, and will (we trust) go on for evermore, death has for us no terror; it is not a shadow, but a light; not an end, but a beginning!\(^{17}\)

While a noble sentiment, the “development of character” into “the perfect Man” seems conspicuously absent from all of Carroll’s novels, even the split-narrative *Sylvie and Bruno*. Of more significance in this excerpt is Carroll’s description of progress’s interminability, of its capacity to “go on for evermore” and even transform the ostensible finality of death from an “end” into a “beginning.” The parenthetical aside seems more like an irksome misgiving than a

\(^{17}\)Carroll, preface to “Sylvie and Bruno,” 252.
statement of faith, and the exclamation point appears hyperbolic. Contrasting, Carroll’s
haunting epigraph to *Sylvie and Bruno* more explicitly mars his encomium to “development,”
stressing instead the possible pointlessness of life and the quiet doom of its “silent end”:

Is all our Life, then, but a dream
Seen faintly in the golden gleam
Athwart Time’s dark resistless stream?

Bowed to the earth with bitter woe,
Or laughing at some raree-show,
We flutter idly to and fro.

Man’s little Day in haste we spend,
And, from its merry noontide, send
No glance to meet the silent end.  

Instead of lauding the triumphant progression of humanity toward perfection, Carroll’s
melancholy poem casts life as something more closely resembling the Venerable Bede’s story of
the sparrow in the mead-hall: a transient, inconsequential “golden gleam” in the midst of the
“dark” and “resistless” flow of time. One’s daily activities are done “idly” and via the
connotatively fragile, capricious (and redolent of nervousness) verb “flutter,” which combines
with the ambivalent “to and fro” to indicate motion without uniform direction. For Carroll, then,
life in motion is both an interminable quest for what Andrew Miller dubs “moral perfectionism”
and an anxious, pointless series of inconsequential activities.  

In the following pages, I trace Carroll’s ambivalence toward linear progress and moral
improvement in the *Alice* stories. I examine the books’ obsession with the concept of continuous
forward movement, but I also demonstrate how Carroll disrupts linear chronology and
emphasizes fruitless activity as a means to argue against the accepted virtues of progress. I then

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18 Lewis Carroll, “Sylvie and Bruno,” in *The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 1996), 243. All subsequent citations of this work will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically.
19 See Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 2-7, 3. Miller defines his central term “moral perfectionism” as “the complex proposition that we turn away from our ordinary lives, realize an ideal self, and perfect what is distinctly human in us—and that we do so in response to exemplary others.”
turn to Carroll’s extended fairy tale in *Sylvie and Bruno* and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893) in an investigation of how its conflation of human and fairy consciousness—an experiment in dichotomous time and space akin to the alternate dimension motif in science fiction—inhibits narrative or character development, and I also highlight the books’ frequently critical treatment of historical progress. Carroll’s premise for this ambitious tale involves its narrator’s sudden, unpredictable trance-like transitions between Fairyland and England, “after the fashion of the Esoteric Buddhists.”20 The constant switching back and forth between the real world and what Carroll fancifully calls “an actual Fairyland”21—a structural model of his epigraphic sentiment of “flutter[ing] idly to and fro” discussed above—undermines any coherence or specific character development the story might otherwise have had and reinforces my contention that Carrollian narrative remains endemically suspicious of progress. Lastly, I briefly discuss the anachronistic and anti-progressive elements of *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), a work uniquely concerned with goal-oriented movement while blithely dismissive of teleological significance and ultimate meaning.

Narrative Rabbit-Holes: Space and Time in Wonderland

Both of Alice’s unorthodox adventures begin in quotidian settings, in situations simply rife for the reformative balm of traditional didacticism, yet Carroll opts for a continual negation of the possibility for progress as improvement or development—both in terms of moral perfectibility and narrative, sequential chronology—instead of teaching Alice the error of her ways. The opening scene of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* stagnates in sweltry monotony. Alice grows restless while her sister reads, complaining to herself that she has “nothing to do”

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21 Ibid.
and indolently musing on whether it would be worth the bother of collecting flowers to make a daisy-chain. Indeed, in the figure of the daisy-chain, Carroll’s ambivalence toward industry and progress assumes a tentative, allegorical shape: Alice senses the futility of making something as transient and fragile as a floral chain and begrudges the “trouble” the repetitive gathering of materials represents. Even in the 1860s, after the dominance of the earlier moralists like Trimmer, Barbauld, and Edgeworth had largely faded, lethargy such as this typically precedes an immediate hostile commentary in most works of children’s fiction. For instance, Charles Kingsley berates the “comfortable” in *The Water-Babies* (1863), whom he describes as “naughty” people “who waxed fat and kicked, like horses overfed and underworked.”

Contrastingly, Alice never learns anything about the evils of indolence during her time in Wonderland, nor do her actions imply any sort of measurable progress: in fact, her first movement into Wonderland is a seemingly interminable fall. Similarly, when her subsequent adventure in the Looking-Glass Country begins, Alice is once again whiling away a sleepy afternoon, this time by engaging in the otiose act of repeatedly rerolling a ball of yarn that her kitten is just as repeatedly unrolling. As in the case with the daisy chain, Alice’s activity with the yarn—and given Carroll’s fondness for puns and other wordplay, I think the literary connotations of this word are intentionally evoked—allegorically renders Carroll’s overall narrative schema for the novel: Alice will spend her time in Looking-Glass Country attempting to impose some form of order on a universe that simply *will* come unraveled at the end, leaving her exactly where she started.

During her extended descent into Wonderland, Alice’s initial ruminations naturally concern the factual, pragmatic implications of a fall without an end. Confronted with the very

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real possibility that she may never cease falling, she affirms her newly acquired courage, estimates the actual distance she has traveled, and then attempts to predict her destination—all cognitive activities roughly equivalent to the real-time considerations of the average reader. In explicating the conventional effects on readers of what she terms “temporal patterns,” Teresa Bridgeman lists the three most significant factors in analyzing the “story-discourse relationship” in any given narrative, according to Meir Sternberg: “the universals of suspense, curiosity, and surprise, which are generated by the gaps between story time and discourse time (or communicative time).” Alice elicits the first two of these “universals” in wondering about the extent of her fall and its unpredictable conclusion, indicating her occasional role as “reader” of her own activity in the narrative. What neither Alice, nor the actual reader, ever learns through the discourse of the narrative, however, are the answers to either of these queries. Instead, the temporal gaps created by Alice’s questions remain agape, forcing her and her readers on to other, unrelated topics and rendering everyone disoriented in narrative time and, eventually, space. Bridgeman goes on to state that such unresolved temporal disruptions cause an inevitable “unease” in the reader (as they certainly do with increasing intensity in Alice): “If these [spatio-temporal hooks] are not consistently provided or their uncertainty is highlighted in a given narrative, we experience disorientation and a degree of unease as an essential part of our engagement with that narrative.” Carroll repeatedly highlights the uncertainty of Alice’s experience—indeed, he focuses on little else—and fosters a relentless sense of discomfort.

24 See M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel,” in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258. In accordance with the concept of the “chronotope” set forth by Mikhail Bakhtin, I shall emphasize the connective relationship between time and space in fictional narrative rather than treating them as separate components, as do some narratologists. After all, as Bakhtin points out, science insists on the indissoluble nature of the two concepts, as one (time) stems from our conceptualization of the other (space): “What counts for us is the fact that [the term chronotope] expresses the inseparability of space and time [time as the fourth dimension of space]” (84).
through his use of unresolved narrative gaps. As Alice falls, she lapses into a speculative debate over whether her cat Dinah would eat a bat, given the opportunity; once she equates and reverses rational ordering through the grammar of her question (in the manner of the “Esoteric Buddhists,” as Carroll might say), she has inadvertently stumbled on the anti-progressive, irrational laws of Wonderland, and her potentially endless fall finally ends: “And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, ‘Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?’ and sometimes ‘Do bats eat cats?’ for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t much matter which way she put it” (9). Taxonomical and sequential ordering matters little in Wonderland or in Looking-Glass Country, where there are no definite answers to any question. Such ambiguity concerning classification and causality makes progress always already moot in terms of the characters’ development and / or movement toward some discernible goal.

Carroll begins to reveal the futility of conventional notions of causality, movement through time, and progress through space during Alice’s journey to Wonderland and Looking-Glass Country, but his subversion does not stop there. Rather, Alice’s heuristic tour of this other world becomes ever more replete with examples of physical recidivism—or atavism, to use the scientific term appropriated by Walter Bagehot and others for common use in the nineteenth century. In Wonderland, Alice oscillates in size from nine feet down to the height of a mouse,

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26 Or in the manner of Michel Foucault, perhaps. See Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage, 1970), 50-63, 54. Foucault contends that the mental process of ordering, or “generalized form of comparison,” is limited or constrained by an individual’s established epistemological perspective, and thus cannot represent a genuine, objective comparison at all: “However, this order or generalized form of comparison can be established only according to its position in the body of our acquired knowledge; the absolute character we recognize in what is simple concerns not the being of things but rather the manner in which they can be known. A thing can be absolute according to one relation yet relative according to others; order can be at once necessary and natural (in relation to thought) and arbitrary (in relation to things), since, according to the way in which we consider it, the same thing may be placed at different points in our order.” Alice’s sleepy utterances about bats and cats transcends this limitation, resulting in the two animals’ relative positions in both language and the biological hierarchy switching back and forth like the arbitrary designations they are.
then swells back up to dimensions large enough to occupy the whole of the White Rabbit’s	house, only to shrink back down to three inches high, shoot back up to a point above the tree-
tops, resume her normal height for a while, and then become enormous in stature near the end of
the story. None of Alice’s changes accomplishes her stated goal of entering the “lovely garden”
she sees when she first arrives in Wonderland, and none of them suffices for long as a workable
solution to her successive problems. Just as she must deliberately move away from her goal in
the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass* in order to come anywhere near it, Alice must be
willing to continuously change her physical stature—and thus her experience of the environment
and its inhabitants—to move around at all in Wonderland. The various comestibles she finds
lying about issue unambiguous commands, not cajoleries or invitations: the labels on the cakes
read “EAT ME” and the notes on the bottles read “DRINK ME,” but the results of following
these instructions are conveniently redacted. Time and again, Alice is constrained to learn
through experience, or forward movement through narrative space-time, but her experiential
knowledge repeatedly proves useless or actually detrimental to her progress, which occurs during
her visit to the White Rabbit’s house:

“I know *something* interesting is sure to happen,” she said to herself, “whenever I eat or
drink anything: so I’ll just see what this bottle does. I do hope it’ll make me grow large
again, for really I’m quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!” . . . “That’s quite
enough—I hope I sha’n’t grow any more—As it is, I ca’n’t get out at the door—I do wish
I hadn’t drunk quite so much!” (28)

The bewildering series of reorientations at different sizes prevents Alice from ever truly learning
anything useful about the landscape and thereby making her way toward the garden—or any
other discernible objective, for that matter. Alice’s surroundings in Wonderland are, according to
Donald Rackin, “careless, indifferent, and absurd” because they embody the Victorian fear of Darwin’s “morally meaningless process that is nature and our only home.” Alice makes no progress because natural history itself teaches the impossibility of such an ordered activity: “Like religion, natural history could not longer serve as a refuge for those who searched for the warm comforts of an intelligible moral pattern in their physical environment.”27 Like many of her Victorian readers, Alice is lost in the wilderness of ontological unintelligibility, repeatedly attempting to assign meaning to and impose order on a world that stubbornly refuses to conform to expectations.

Despite Alice’s incessant confrontations with unreasonable demands, absurd outcomes, and obtuse characters, Carroll’s heroine tries her best to soldier on through her adventure with the military resolve of an experienced campaigner. The creatures she meets occasionally assist in directing her in one way or another, but more often than not, their directions lead to pointless diversions that merely delay or otherwise detract from her forward movement. Additionally, her movement loses its focused direction as she moves deeper into Wonderland: her resolve to reach the beautiful garden begins to wane, and she simply tries to move “somewhere” as the spatio-temporal rules of her adventure become less reliably predictable. For example, after she escapes from the White Rabbit’s house, she resolves to “grow to [her] right size again” and “to find [her] way into that lovely garden” (32). After her frustrating encounters with the Caterpillar, the Pigeon, the Duchess and the Cook, and the baby-turned-pig, Alice loses sight of her “plan” and asks the Cheshire Cat for more open-ended directions:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” added Alice as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.” (51)

The Cheshire Cat’s famous response to Alice’s request for guidance reveals the vacuous quality of his first comment: in both available directions lies the same outcome, which is, essentially, insanity. Here at the crossroads of Wonderland, where even the guide is mad and liable to vanish without warning, conventional notions of both navigable space and viable choice disappear along with the Cat. Direction no longer matters; the destinations are all the same: “Visit either you like: they’re both mad” (51). More significantly, this cryptic exchange—appearing at the textual center of Carroll’s story—begins the total homogenization of time and space in Wonderland. If all roads lead to the same or similar outcomes, then narrative space is uniform and progress is meaningless. After all, how can Alice be said to have made progress if her destination differs not at all from her point of origin? Additionally, the Cat conflates space and time into the one maddeningly equivocal word “long,” suggesting that neither time nor distance will help one achieve anything more profound than getting “somewhere” in Wonderland. And Carroll reiterates this homogenization of space-time through the frame story about Alice’s dream: Alice remains stationary and comparatively little time has elapsed in the “real world” during the whole of her adventure in Wonderland.

As the temporal counterpart to the Cat’s spatially homogenizing directions, the Mad Hatter’s eternal tea party reduces chronological progression to a synchronic singularity, and in doing so, creates a temporal loop in the middle of Carroll’s narrative. Alice chooses to move in the direction of the March Hare’s house, which she finds, but she also encounters the Mad Hatter
in the same location, which reinforces the Cat’s comments about the arbitrary condition of
direction and space in Wonderland. After a few introductory exchanges between Alice and the
tea party attendants, the Hatter spontaneously asks, “What day of the month is it?”—indicating
his tentative acknowledgement of what Paul Ricoeur terms “cosmological time.” However, when
Alice responds with an ambiguous date, “the fourth” (potentially the fourth of May, which was
Alice Liddell’s birthday), the Hatter declares his timepiece to be “two days wrong” due to its
having been lathered in butter, and the illusion of accurate, measurable time is swept away.
Clocks and watches are unreliable here, dates are as mutable as clouds, and there are no
“connectors between phenomenological time and cosmological time.”\(^28\)

This disruption between
time as it is experienced and time as it is conceptualized in the abstract, in forms like “history” or
“millennia,” creates what Ricoeur calls an “aporia,” or sense of epistemological confusion. In
Alice’s case, the aporias generated during her foray in Wonderland continue to escalate as the
spatial and temporal guidelines are repeatedly breached in the interests of absurdity or to
maintain the logical integrity of a well-constructed pun.\(^29\)

Bewilderingly, the inhabitants of
Wonderland both ascribe to the systems of measuring time that make keeping track of the date a
concern and negate their possibility by making bizarre claims like “It’s always six o’clock now”
(58). For the Hatter, Time becomes an individual, susceptible to influence and capable of holding
a grudge, resulting in the impossibility of standardized time and thus in the neutralization of time
as regulated movement through history. “It’s always six o’clock now” conflates the diachronic
“always” with the synchronic “now,” which makes the concept of temporal movement both

\(^28\) Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 128. Ricoeur goes on to affirm the temporal liberty from cosmological time as universal to all “fictive temporal experiences.” Each fictional universe, according to Ricoeur’s theory, is entirely unique, including its temporal dimension; thus, “Fictive temporal experience cannot be totalized.” However, what is perhaps peculiar to Carroll’s narratives, particularly the *Alice* stories, is that the characters even refuse to abide by the rules of their own “temporal experiences.”

\(^29\) See, for example, *Alice in Wonderland*, 57-8. The Hatter jokes about “murdering the time” during his performance of “Twinkle, twinkle, little bat” at the Queen’s concert, which results in Time’s punishing him by maintaining “six o’clock” indefinitely.
necessary and inhibitive to understanding the statement. The Hatter’s watch apparently keeps track of the day despite the fact that the day never moves past six o’clock, just as the Cheshire Cat’s false choice represents two alternative “directions” that lead to the same location. Wonderland offers up the illusion of progress, both through time and space, only to dispense with that illusion in fits of nonsense.

“Never jam to-day”: Progress Postponed in Looking-Glass Country

In his lecture on the hero as “a man of letters,” Carlyle describes the intellectual process by which a culture’s poets invent goals, what he calls “some sacred or high object,” and then inspire others to attain them, following in the footsteps of their vatic forbears. However, for Carlyle, simple discipleship is not enough: each successive generation of pilgrims upon the “Path” must make “improvements, with changes where such seem good” and “enlargements” that contribute to an ever-widening “Highway” toward some dubious “City or Shrine, or any Reality to drive to.”

Such is the terminology by which the preeminent Victorian sage defined, and to some extent created, his culture’s obsession with progress. Within the same decade as the appearance of Carlyle’s lectures on historical heroes, Lord Macaulay’s highly successful series *The History of England* (1849) began to reconstruct Great Britain’s perspective on its past, just as Carlyle’s various writings were proffering glimpses of its glorious future. Macaulay assured his readers that though their historical tradition contained some nasty inconsistencies, corruptions, and serious missteps along the way, it was nonetheless a record of “physical, intellectual, and moral improvement” that would undoubtedly prevent anyone “who is correctly informed as to the past” from adopting “a morose or desponding view of the present.”

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Victorians would avoid the mistakes of their predecessors because, as Macaulay insists, “their knowledge was inferior to ours.” Of course, historical revisionism and chronological bigotry are nothing new, nor are they necessarily more pronounced during the long nineteenth century than in previous or successive eras. However, the combination of widespread national self-aggrandizement and a proliferation of so-called “prophetic” writings, like those of Carlyle, Arnold, and Spencer, provided the perfect conditions for the distinctly Victorian preoccupation with endless improvement in every conceivable ontological arena. If the past remains a treasure trove of experience with which to stabilize the present, and if the future contains nothing but the promise of uninterrupted amelioration for the entire species, then every passing moment is of the utmost importance in bridging that temporal gap. In the words of one of the nineteenth century’s favorite idiomatic expressions, “one must make hay while the sun shines,” and the Victorians made a tremendous amount of hay.

The down side of making so much hay, however, was the extreme speed at which almost every aspect of Victorian life was changing; massive revolutions in science and technology, aggressive revision in religious thought and scriptural interpretation, and some of the most sweeping political reform in the whole of British history combined to create a sort of temporal crucible for the people of nineteenth-century England. Even the Victorian impulse to carve out a niche of universal time through autobiography or memoir in an attempt “to find coherence and meaning in the shape of their own lives” withered under the accusations of the “prophets of

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33 See W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*, ed. Ian Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 434-5. According to Bradley, the idiom’s “first recorded appearance in print was in 1546 in the form ‘Whan the sunne shineth make hay’.” The idiom shows up in many publications and literary works during the nineteenth century, including Dickens’s *Household Words*, Vol. 5, Issue 114 (1852): “In a country which, like Norway, can hardly be said to possess more than two seasons, one must “make hay while the sun shines.” Of course, the phrase also appears in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Iolanthe* (1882), during the recitative “If you go in, You’re sure to win”: “While the sun shines make your hay— / Where a will is, there’s a way— / Beard the lion in his lair— / None but the brave deserve the fair!”
progress,” who deemed such writing “regressive, its surrender to introspection as a failure to measure up to the active, public virtues of a new civilisation.”

Lewis Carroll felt these pressures perhaps even more acutely than his contemporaries. His diaries typically disavow the ruminative and the digressive, sticking to the barest of banal details, or what he terms “a specimen of my life.” Yet occasionally, his entries reveal a painful desire to make something more substantial out of his life, to live up to the demands of his time:

Now at the close of the Old Year, let me review the past and take counsel with myself for the future. I must with sorrow confess that my bad habits are almost unchanged. I am afraid lately I have been even more irregular than ever, and more averse to exertion: though the labor of last term has been nearly as heavy as at any period in my life, it has been forced on me by my position, rather than taken voluntarily. . . . I do trust most sincerely to amend myself in those respects in which the past year has exhibited the most grievous shortcomings . . .

Nearing the end of another year, Carroll laments his lack of personal progress, the “unchanged” status of his ambiguous “bad habits.” He bemoans his indolence and the perfunctory nature of his professional output, resolving to “amend” his “most grievous shortcomings” in the new year. At the close of the following year, Carroll again records his fervent ambition to make use of every moment of his “waste time,” even listing subjects for memorization during his railway travels on note cards, on which he can inscribe “a cycle to work them by, and to record progress.” On his itemized list of goals for 1858, his third entry encompasses practically every aspect of his daily life in its program for self-development: “Constant improvements of habits of activity,

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punctuality, etc.”37 Such thoughts of self-recrimination, along with increasingly rigid schemes for self-enhancement, tormented the retiring Oxford mathematician for most of his life, and these concerns undoubtedly carry over into his literary creations.

Like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, the 1871 edition of Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There begins with a dedicatory poem to the three Liddell children who originally inspired the Alice stories, but the sober poem opening the latter volume stresses the transience of human existence and death’s inevitable encroachment on the winsome bliss of childhood: “Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread, / With bitter tidings laden, / Shall summon to unwelcome bed / A melancholy maiden!” The poem’s speaker employs an elegiac tone, disclosing his sorrow by mentioning the “shadow of a sigh” that “may tremble through the story.” Time is mentioned repeatedly, first as an abstract concept whose sole quality is its fleetness, and afterwards as the metronomic analogy for the first stories, which marked Carroll’s day of “summer suns” on the river trip to Godstow in 1862 and “served to time / The rhythm of our rowing.” In his most poignant temporal reference, the speaker utilizes the death / bedtime metaphor to emphasize the magical, preservative power of his “fairy tale,” a mesmeric narrative not unlike Scheherazade’s nightly tales to King Shahrayar, which can perhaps suspend time within itself and maintain the “pure unclouded brow” of childhood forever against the fervid flux of linear history, the “moody madness” and “raving blast” of the world “without”: “We are but older children, dear, / Who fret to find our bedtime near. . . . The magic words shall hold thee fast: / Thou shalt not heed the raving blast” (103).

Taking its cue from the dedication, Through the Looking-Glass resonates with anxiety about the rapid disappearance of time and the importance of the proper use of such a limited resource. From the beginning, the story is replete with expressions of the desire to move “on

37 Carroll, The Diaries of Lewis Carroll, 1:136.
beyond” the boundaries of the restrictive present: Alice longs to “see that bit” of the fireplace hidden just out of sight in the mirror, and once she’s through into the Looking-Glass Country, she wants to “see what the rest of the house is like,” followed by the garden, and then the hill, and eventually the successive “squares” on the topographical chess board that makes up the countryside (110-28). Along the way, the characters Alice meets repeatedly admonish her not to waste her time, yet she is given no purposeful tasks with which to productively occupy it.38 Strange people and beasts appear and disappear, barking instructions and urging Alice onward along her path to the Eighth Square, but there is no connective, sustained trajectory for Alice to use to measure or evaluate her progress. Instead, she encounters an array of critical creatures who offer completely useless advice on how she might improve herself, creating a narrative trend that subverts the very possibility of individual improvement itself. As Alice discusses crime and punishment with the disheveled White Queen, for example, she learns that the Queen “[lives] backwards” and that her “memory works both ways.” She informs Alice that the Mad Hatter is currently in prison for a crime he has yet to commit, and when Alice asks what would happen if the prisoner never commits the crime for which he is already punished, the Queen replies, “‘That would be all the better, wouldn’t it?’” (150-1). Thus, if punishment without crime prevents crime from occurring, then the penitent criminal cannot truly be said to benefit from his faults and better himself; he remains fundamentally unchanged. The Queen’s absurd claim for improvement without experience makes her escalating chant of “‘better, and better, and better!’” all the more ironically dismissive of the possibility for genuine moral improvement, particularly as she later utters the same mantra while devolving into a sheep.39

38 See, for one example, the Gnat in Chapter III, who commands Alice to stop asking theoretical questions about nomenclature and “go on with [her] list of insects.” He then peremptorily remarks, “. . . you’re wasting time” (132).
39 See Andrew H. Miller, The Burdens of Perfection, 15-16. Miller suggests that the individual aspirant to moral perfection must both solicit and refuse advice from exemplary models, creating an existential paradox that requires
Carroll takes perpetual improvement to task most extensively in the character of the White Knight, ridiculing his halting progress on horseback alongside his quixotic “inventions.” The clumsy knight, with his endless supply of inane technological innovations, serves as an ironic symbol for much of what Carroll and others distrusted about progress and its proponents, what Jerome Buckley describes as “that headlong movement for its own sake, the mere acceleration of tempo which some of their contemporaries considered the very essence of progress.” However, prior to Alice’s meeting with the White Knight in the wood of the Seventh Square, she encounters an undeniably direct representation of blundering Victorian progress, coupled with its frantic need for memorializing the fleeting present:

The next moment soldiers came running through the wood, at first in twos and threes, then ten or twenty together, and at last in such crowds that they seemed to fill the whole forest. Alice got behind a tree, for fear of being run over, and watched them go by. She thought that in all her life she had never seen soldiers so uncertain on their feet: they were always tripping over something or other, and whenever one went down, several more always fell over him, so that the ground was soon covered with little heaps of men. Then came the horses. Having four feet, these managed rather better than the foot-soldiers; but even they stumbled now and then; and it seemed to be a regular rule that, whenever a horse stumbled, the rider fell off instantly. The confusion got worse every moment, and Alice was very glad to get out of the wood into an open place, where she found the White King seated on the ground, busily writing in his memorandum book. (169-70)

both a firm individualism and a submissive emulation of others. Similarly, the judicial system that would imprison the Hatter, or “Hatta,” as he is called in Through the Looking-Glass, regardless of his present or future criminality, insists on both his individual potential for criminal activity (indicating his essential nature) and his willingness to subject himself to preemptive rehabilitation (indicating his moral deficiency): “Understanding the self to be constituted in relation to others and across time, divided even as it dreams its own present coherence, moral perfectionism both resists and reinforces what has come to be called essentialism.”

40 Jerome H. Buckley, The Triumph of Time, 64.
Coming as this scene does at the opening of Chapter VII, titled “The Lion and the Unicorn” and devoted rather overtly to the criticism of England’s historical obsessions, political disputes, and aggressive military campaigns—the chapter ends with a cacophonous drum cadence that drives Alice to her knees—we can feel secure in asserting its relevance to Carroll’s ongoing critique of the specifically British, and specifically nineteenth-century, notions of progress. The soldiers trip and fall because they are “running through the wood”: they have no foresight, no plan, no preparations that might prevent them from tumbling pell-mell over one another in their frantic progression. Alice fulfills the role of the withdrawn observer, akin to Matthew Arnold’s speaker in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (1855), who marvels at the massive spectacle but remains fearful of it as well, who hides “for fear of being run over” by the scrambling hordes. The White King scribbles “busily” in his “memorandum-book” to maintain some hold on the details of the tumultuous present—he assures Alice that there are precisely “four thousand two hundred and seven” soldiers in the wood (170). Conflicting temporal markers pervade the passage, indicating the event’s shocking immediacy, its suddenness, but also its part in a more diachronic pattern of poorly organized, hectic movement: the increasingly numerous soldiers appear “the next moment,” and their stumbling causes the “confusion” to get worse “every moment,” yet “they were always tripping over something or other,” and falling off of their horses seems “a regular rule.” By conflating these temporal paradigms of “always” and “every moment”

41 See Lewis Carroll, “The Blank Cheque: A Fable” in The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 1996), 1129-34, 1130. Carroll more directly ridicules the characteristic lack of foresight and rash decision-making of his culture in this sardonic little fable lambasting Oxford University’s blind expense policy regarding building proposals for new schools, wherein a manic, wealthy family lead such fruitlessly busy lives that they leave the planning of their annual seaside vacation to their maid, Susan, with the added provision of a “blank cheque” for whatever expenses the trip may involve: “I don’t know where we’re going: John doesn’t know where we’re going—but we’re certainly going somewhere; and we shan’t even know the name of the place, till we find ourselves there!”

42 See Matthew Arnold, “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” in The Poems of Matthew Arnold, eds. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 305: “But, where the road runs near the stream, / Oft through the trees they catch a glance / Of passing troops in the sun's beam— / Pennon, and plume, and flashing lance! / Forth to the world those soldiers fare, / To life, to cities, and to war!”
in his description of the same event, Carroll again combines the inexhaustible potential of the present to “[get] worse” or “better, and better, and better” with the impossibility of such alteration through his employment of anachronological terms like “always.” To put it another way, time in Carollian “progress” is both linear and cyclical, with instantaneous changes going hand-in-hand with recognizable patterns and repetitions. Thus real, measurable progress, from one state of being to another, more desirable state, devolves into mere maintenance, the willingness to press on with the full knowledge that things will always be the same.

Alice experiences the new progress of maintenance most directly during her first meeting with the Red Queen in the Second Square. Initially, Alice cannot reach the Red Queen, though she can see her plainly. She must turn around and walk in the opposite direction from her destination if she wishes to make any progress towards it—a physical rendering of the Looking-Glass Country’s inverted logic, “where everything works backwards.” This motif continues later on, when the White Queen screams before she pricks her finger and when Alice must pass the plum-cake around before she cuts it into portions. Many critics have seen this inverted movement as something more than a mere structural conceit: Robert Polhemus calls it “the comedy of regression,“ and Karen Coats alludes to it as “Carroll’s increasingly desperate attempts” to “keep [Alice’s] self-knowledge repressed.” What these readings fail to notice about Alice’s encounter with the Red Queen, however, is the event’s singular attention to both time and its efficient utilization. Admittedly, Stephen Prickett affirms that the episode signifies a simple equation inversion, whereby the conventional expression “Speed = distance / time” becomes “Speed = time / distance,” but Prickett neglects to explore this inversion of variables in

43 Gillian Avery, “Fairy Tales for Pleasure,” 129.
terms of the narrative’s thematic obsession with progress and goal-oriented movement. The Red Queen’s first words to Alice concern her productivity and temporal efficiency: “. . . don’t twiddle your fingers all the time. . . . Curtsey while you’re thinking what to say. It saves time. . . . It’s time for you to answer now . . . .” (124). The condescending Queen then goes on to negate (and invert) all of Alice’s initial narrative goals, suggesting that what Alice calls a “garden” is really a “wilderness,” and that what Alice saw as a “hill” is really a “valley” (125).

Once Alice has adopted a socially approved goal, that of bettering herself by becoming a Queen in “the great huge game of chess that’s being played—all over the world,” the Queen takes her on as a protégé and begins to run:

Alice could never quite make it out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is, that they were running hand in hand, and the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying “Faster! Faster!”, but Alice felt she could not go faster, though she had no breath left to say so. (126)

Carroll blurs verb tenses here to accentuate the temporal distortion of this episode. The narrator employs a brief prolepsis to inform us of Alice’s thoughts “afterwards,” which functions as a narratological analogue for Alice’s sudden movement with the Queen: we are suddenly thrust into the indeterminate future and given the ruminative perspective of a post-narrative Alice who “remembers” in the present tense. More significantly, Alice cannot sustain the dizzying pace of her self-appointed goal, even when assisted by the Queen. She cannot surpass the Red Queen as she should in her role of protégé (and as she is encouraged to do once she reaches the final square and receives her crown); instead, “it was all she could do to keep up with her.” During her flight, Alice discovers that no matter how fast they run, “they never seemed to pass anything.”

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The Queen subsequently explains that this deficiency in progressive movement is largely Alice’s fault: “Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!” (127). Of course, Alice cannot even hope to achieve such a high level of velocity, so she temporarily renounces her goal and opts to remain stationary: “‘I’d rather not try, please!’ said Alice. ‘I’m quite content to stay here . . . .’” (127). From this point in the narrative onward, Alice rarely moves anywhere without assistance, and her progress becomes an exercise in maintenance, a mere marching in place.

Alice progresses on a treadmill through Looking-Glass Country. When she enters the strange little metamorphic shop in Chapter V—although “enters” is probably too active a verb for her sudden appearance in an environment that materializes around her—she finds that she cannot actually focus on any item for sale without it disappearing from her sight: “. . . whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold” (154). Any active motion towards something, or even an earnest attempt to “make out exactly” what something is, results in opacity for Alice. Like the bit behind the fireplace in the mirror, nothing Alice wants is ever quite within reach in Looking-Glass Country. She spends her time in the shop “vainly pursuing a large bright thing that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box,” but the protean object retreats from her grasp farther up the shelves until “the ‘thing’ went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it” (154-5). Like Kantian noumena, the objects Alice pursues remain unachievable: she cannot grasp the loveliest rushes along the river during her boat ride with the Sheep, and when she returns to the shop, she cannot reach the egg she’s just purchased, which “seems to get further away the more [she] walk[s] toward it” (158). Progress, therefore, becomes a meaningless effort to grasp an ever-
retreating will-o-the-wisp, a mirage that recedes along the horizon as quickly as one can move in its direction. Here, Carroll seems to be subtly critiquing what Walter Houghton called “aspiration without an object,” that peculiar Victorian enthusiasm for passionate endeavor without a definite goal:

If we look closely at Victorian aspiration, we discover that the ideal object, whether a great cause or an exalted conception of human nature, is often vague and sometimes nonexistent. When that is the case, aspiration has changed its character and dynamics. For where there is no definite goal, it becomes an end in itself . . . . The eye is focused not on an ideal but on oneself in pursuit of an ideal—some ideal or other.47

Alice’s goals in the Sheep’s shop are hardly noble or humanitarian; she simply wants to browse the merchandise and retrieve her property. But Carroll does appear to question the value of pursuing something one cannot even identify in Alice’s attempt to reach the doll/work-box, her “some ideal or other.” And as to Alice’s larger goal in the story, she has no clear conception of what becoming a Looking-Glass Queen entails, so her “ideal object” remains somewhat “vague,” and her forward movement “becomes an end in itself”: “. . . and now for the last brook, and to be a Queen! How grand it sounds!” (190). Alice hurls herself across the final brook into the Eighth Square with no other thought than how “grand” being a Queen “sounds.” Encouraged in her quest by the Red Queen, but given little comprehensible advice or instruction, Alice is left to aspire to royalty blindly, with no clear conception of her destination. Carroll lampoons such directionless enthusiasm even in Alice, who is surprised to find a crown on her head the moment she lands in the Eighth Square and admits “I never expected I should be a Queen so soon” (192), but his most scathing critique of “aspiration without an object” occurs in his characterization of the White Knight, who invents useless contraptions incessantly and cannot stay on his horse.

Critics and biographers tend to focus on the White Knight as Carroll’s textual avatar, as a kind of character representative for his clumsy fondness for Alice Liddell and their relationship’s increasingly absurd unsuitability. Morton Cohen claims the White Knight to be one of “several roles” Carroll plays in *Looking-Glass*, an “old, bumbling, complaining, overdrawn representation of himself” that the young Alice rejects as she matures into young adulthood. More significant for the purposes of the current analysis, however, is his function as an epitome of the mindless perseverance that remains the object of consistent satire in *Through the Looking-Glass*. In fact, the ineffectual knight provides an ironic endorsement of the traditional, often economic virtues prescribed in children’s literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. M. O. Grenby suggests that the “much more commercial qualities” of “diligence, thrift, caution, and honesty” permeated the children’s books of the 1700s, and although the White Knight possesses all of these qualities, he achieves nothing and makes no progress. For example, the White Knight recommends cautious preparation. His horse it outfitted with apparatuses for many contingencies, including anklets to ward off sharks, a mousetrap to keep the mice away, and a beehive to encourage the production of honey. None of his preparations serve any real purpose, however, and the quality of “caution”—or “to be provided for everything,” as the knight says—loses its virtuous practicality. Diligence receives equal satire in the knight’s clumsy cavalcade. When Alice suggests that he should practice riding more frequently to avoid his numerous falls, the White Knight indignantly repeats, “I’ve had plenty of practice . . . plenty of practice!” and he attempts to instruct Alice in “the great art of riding” during the brief intervals between tumbles from his mount. But perhaps the quality that receives the greatest ridicule in the character of the

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White Knight is one that Grenby does not mention: the distinctly Victorian virtue of industry. The knight boasts of numerous inventions, from a “deal box” hung upside down to attract bees, to a method of crossing a gate by standing on one’s head. Like his absurd precautionary measures, however, his inventions are utterly worthless disasters that often complicate or distort very simple problems. Despite his continuous tumbles from his horse, the White Knight goes on inventing, yet it is Alice who offers the only useful idea for solving his most immediate problem: “You ought to have a wooden horse on wheels, that you ought!” (184). The knight’s “cleverest” invention completes his profile in uselessness, and its eternally deferred creation recalls Alice’s struggles to advance in the Second Square and her inability to reach the items in the Sheep’s shop: here, Carroll again plays with the idea of the unachievable objective. The knight’s clever pudding, which he invented “during the meat-course,” was not served as part of that meal, or the meals on the following day: “‘Well, not the next day,’ the Knight repeated as before: ‘not the next day. In fact,’ he went on, holding his head down, his voice getting lower and lower, ‘I don’t believe that pudding ever was cooked! In fact, I don’t believe that pudding ever will be cooked!’” (186). Thus, the pudding cannot be said to have been invented at all, if it never came into existence or shall at any point in the future. The knight has essentially invented a non-pudding, whose ingredients, appropriately enough, “[begin] with blotting-paper,” a material designed to erase and/or absorb ink and thus writing, or discernible ideas.

50 See Seth Lerer, “From Islands to Empires,” in Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 151-71, 151. Although Grenby may not mention it, the glorification of industry (or sometimes “productivity” or “ingenuity”) remains a central theme in much of nineteenth-century literature for children and adults. As Seth Lerer summarizes in his treatment of the generic evolution of children’s literature, the literary successors to the profoundly influential Robinson Crusoe adopted and elaborated on its celebration of the industrious hero: “Central to the popularity of Crusoe is play: the use of tools, the world of things behind the novel. . . But that world takes on new textures in an age of industry. The mechanics of guns and charts, of locomotive engines and explosives, of cigarettes and canned goods, all fed into a later fascination with the Crusoe-hero’s mastery of the mass of material things before him. Nineteenth-century characters from the works of Captain Marryat to those of H. Rider Haggard all had this streak of ingenuity.”
Like the buffoonish White Knight, Alice achieves very little in Looking-Glass Country. Contrary to what some critics have written about the strength and resolve of the Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, my contention remains that she loses the potent agency that allowed her to exclaim “Who cares for you? . . . You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” as her valedictory to Wonderland and becomes the sheepish girl who forgets her own name and cries at the prospect of being a mere figment of the Red King’s dream. Alice’s actions assume the usual connotations of the role of pawn in *Through the Looking-Glass*, where she is bandied about like a plaything until she becomes so frightened that she loses her temper. Like so many of her Victorian readers, Alice experiences a series of traumatic shocks that escalate her anxiety and increase her desire to slow things down. She struggles fruitlessly against a complex system of almost imperceptible rules—she is, after all, a piece in a chess game—that baffles her attempts to comprehend it and impedes her status as the hero of her own narrative. In fact, Alice demonstrates the fragility of the concept of the Carlylean hero in charge of her own destiny and at the helm of history itself: she is given only one direction in which to travel, from which she cannot deviate even an inch; she is compelled to listen to an endless litany of poetic recitations against her will; and unlike her travels in Wonderland, she does not often control how and when she will transition into the next stage of her adventure. For example, during her journey by rail through the Third Square, Alice finds herself in a train car, but with no ticket to give the Guard, signifying her lack of choice as to the method or speed of her transportation. She resents her sudden appearance on the train, and

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51 See, for example, U. C. Knoepflmacher, “Shrinking Alice,” in *Ventures Into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 192-227, 197: “Despite her subordination as dreamer to Carroll’s own fictional dream constructions, this Alice functions as an agent who persistently shows herself to be far more inventive and independent than her easily frustrated *Wonderland* predecessor.”

52 See Karen Coats, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands*, 85. Coats highlights Alice’s distinctive lack of agency as an effect of Carroll’s attempt to symbolically limit her real-life counterpart’s psychological and physical development: “He mediates Alice through the locus of control that is the text . . . . Within that locus, she appears to map herself but is allowed to do so only within several more frames. . . . Within the inverted dream frame, Alice’s journey is further circumscribed by the rules of a chess game that dictate her moves as a pawn who will become a queen if she reaches the eighth square.”
when the man dressed in white paper instructs her to purchase return tickets at each stop, she vehemently replies, “Indeed I sha’n’ t! I don’t belong to this railway journey at all—I was in a wood just now—and I wish I could get back there” (131). This example is one of several instances in the narrative where Alice exhibits anxiety over her compulsory forward movement, instances that confirm Carroll’s unease over his favorite character’s forced quest through random encounters toward a dubious reward in the Eighth Square, where, as the Red Queen somewhat disingenuously remarks, “it’s all feasting and fun” (128). She hesitates before entering the wood of no names, begs the Sheep to stop the rowboat so she may gather some rushes, and implores the White King to stop running on the way to the fight between the lion and unicorn so she may catch her breath. Yet at every pause, someone or something reminds her of the ineluctability of her constrained progress through space and time toward her preordained goal of queenship: the wood of no names remains “the only way to the Eighth Square” (135), the rushes she gathers from the river wither instantly, and the White King ruthlessly puns on Alice’s fevered request for him “to stop a minute” with the rejoinder that “a minute goes by so fearfully quick” and cannot be stopped (173). In Carroll’s narratives, history looms as an impersonal, irreversible force, propelling its occupants ever onward like a sailboat before a gale, and like a boat upon the ocean, the ability to discern one’s progress is an uncommonly difficult, if not occasionally impossible, task.

Perhaps one additional example from Through the Looking-Glass will serve to clarify what I am attempting to characterize as Carroll’s morbid fascination with the inevitable rip-tide

53 See U. C. Knoepflmacher, “The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction 37, no. 4 (1983): 497-530, 511. Knoepflmacher suggests that Alice’s comparatively haphazard movement in Wonderland assumes a more definite goal in Through the Looking-Glass, but he also affirms that Carroll seems less than zealous in his narrative endorsement of her quest for the crown: “If, in Wonderland, a younger Alice was forced to go “up and down” in uncontrolled fashion, in Looking-Glass-land she submits to the rules of an adult chess game. Her steady forward progress is towards the goal of queenhood: her crowning comes to signify adult powers she has already tried to adopt in her handling of the childish black kitten. . . . however, Carroll is highly ambivalent towards the adult stage that Alice is so eager to embrace.”
of history and its accompanying confusion regarding progressive movement toward definite goals. Once Alice finally achieves her crown and begins to confabulate with her fellow queens, she learns some surprising information about the multiplicity of time in Looking-Glass Country. After confusing the causal relationship between lightning and thunder and then attempting to rectify her mistake, Alice is reminded of the irrevocability of language: “‘It’s too late to correct it,’ said the Red Queen: ‘when you’ve once said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences’” (195). Immediately following this reiteration of the unidirectional nature of history, the Red Queen informs Alice that Looking-Glass Country experiences a strange sort of lateral timeline, whereby many days occur simultaneously: “‘Now here, we mostly have days and nights two or three at a time, and sometimes in the winter we take as many as five nights together—for warmth, you know’” (195). Paradoxically, this bizarre, bundled multi-present is both “‘five times as warm, and five times as cold’” as any single day in the normal timeline. Therefore, Carrollian narrative posits a history that is both unidirectional and polychronous, in which a multiplicity of presents allows for an abundance of every desirable quality—the Queen goes on to say that she is “‘five times as rich as [Alice is], and five times as clever’”—and progress becomes redundant.  

Whereas in Wonderland Alice could not make any progress due to the temporal and spatial homogenization of her surroundings, she cannot progress in Looking-Glass Country because the historical timeline precludes the rectification of past mistakes (she cannot go back), and because the preponderance of concurrent historical eventualities makes every conceivable goal both an imminent reality and an inherent impossibility.

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54 See Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 119. Carroll appears to be toying with what Morson terms “sideshadowing,” a narrative technique by which the actual historical timeline opens up to include every alternative timeline in an endless array of potentialities: “Sideshadowing restores the possibility of possibility. Its most fundamental lesson is: to understand a moment is to grasp not only what did happen but also what else might have happened. Hypothetical histories shadow actual ones. Some nonfactual events enjoy their own kind of reality: the temporal world consists not just of actualities and impossibilities but also of real though unactualized possibilities.”
Due to the frame structure encasing both Wonderland and Looking-Glass Country, Alice remains fundamentally unaltered by her experience in these alternative worlds. When she emerges from the dream, or trance-like state, she always narrates her adventures to her sister, but then she runs off to tea or continues playing with her kittens. Thus, whereas in children’s books like Kingsley’s *Water-Babies* or Burnett’s *Secret Garden* (1911) the child hero emerges from the other world much improved or enlightened by his or her experience, Alice merely emerges from the other world, maintaining the exact same disposition with which she entered. Alice’s adventures not only challenge the notion that children can or should be improved through completing arduous tasks or surviving frightening ordeals, but they also question the very basic concept of connective causality itself, throwing into doubt the idea that anyone can improve in any way. As Roger Sale rightfully notes, Carroll’s fantasy worlds do not allow for logical coherence or narrative trajectory; rather, they are loose juxtapositions of episodic nonsense that tend as much toward disintegration as progression: “There is nothing structural in any large sense about Lewis Carroll’s imagination, nothing that accretes, gives from one moment to help the next.”

Perhaps the only universal constant in Carroll’s creation is the constant of movement itself. Nothing remains stationary: inanimate objects whirl about, animals rush around to keep dubious appointments, people transform into animals and back again, whole environments reconstruct themselves suddenly and often, and Alice remains in the center of it all, resolutely endeavoring to make sense of a world without direction or purpose. And contrary to the claims of many critics, the movement of Wonderland and Looking-Glass Country is completely without purpose. It does not consistently reveal a regressive tendency toward primitivism or oblivion, as

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Humphrey Gardner suggests.⁵⁶ After all, Wonderland resonates with occasional pretentions to gentility and high civilization: the Queen’s albeit ludicrous game of croquet on the manicured lawns of her estate; the complex, rigidly regulated tea party of the Hatter and Hare; the convoluted proceedings of the trial of the stolen tarts. And Looking-Glass Country is replete with sophisticated flora and fauna, including the haughty talking flowers and the loquaciously informative Gnat. Characters and situations advance just as often as they regress in Carroll’s worlds. Similarly, the suggestion that Alice’s adventures are essentially fantastical *bildungsromans* all about her sexual and psychological maturation, promulgated most famously by William Empson in his influential essay “The Child as Swain” (1935),³⁷ seems to overlook the fact that Alice gains precious little power over her surroundings until the absolute end of both narratives, wherein she achieves her escape only through losing her composure and resorting to violence—much as the immature characters she has met theretofore have consistently done.

Unsettling or frustrating though it may be, the frantic movement of Carroll’s narratives has no secret meaning or covert, encoded agenda that is not merely coincidental. Rather, the constant, aimless running about of the inhabitants of these topsy-turvy realms reveals Carroll’s criticism (and fear) of progress and the ultimate significance of an existence that seemed to him increasingly “dream”-like: “Ever drifting down the stream— / Lingering in the golden gleam— / Life, what is it but a dream?” (209).

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⁵⁶ See Humphrey Carpenter, “Alice and the Mockery of God,” in *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 44-69, 60-1, 67: “The state of Nothingness or Not Being, which at the very least is death and at its worst is something more frightening, lies just around every corner in both Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass; and it is this that gives the books a driving purpose, even a sense of desperate urgency . . . . The baby turns into a pig. The dormouse becomes an object to be stuffed into a teapot. The court turns into a pack of cards. The Cheshire Cat fades into a grin. It is a world that is constantly uncreating itself.”

⁵⁷ See William Empson, “The Child as Swain,” in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 344-57, 344-5: “The books are so frankly about growing up that there is no great discovery in translating them into Freudian terms . . . . The essential idea behind the books is a shift onto the child, which Dodgson did not invent, of the obscure tradition of pastoral. The formula is now ‘child-becomes-judge’ . . . .”
“Eerie” States: Character Disintegration and Development in *Sylvie and Bruno*

Continuing his skeptical exploration of character development over time, as well as a modified version of Gary Morson’s concept of “sideshadowing,” or employing multiple presents to decentralize conventional narrative chronology, Carroll creates a sense of being borne along on the irresistible tide of experience in the character of the “historian” in *Sylvie and Bruno*, who oscillates between planes of existence with no warning or volitional control. His frequent transitions occur suddenly, disorienting the reader and often emphasizing the fundamentally altered constraints of the narrative, promising events that will not come or denying events that have already occurred. In such a relativist history, where many “facts” are the historian’s fancy, and where the real world becomes no more actual, consistent, or predictable than the haphazard labyrinth of Fairyland—which is, incidentally, only an approximate geographical neighbor to Carroll’s other imaginary construct in the story, “Outland”—real development, for character or for plot, is no longer an option. Such loose narrative construction, when coupled with the historian’s uniquely mesmeric or meditative state during his transitions, suggests both Carroll’s preoccupation with unorthodox time and his perspective on the possibility of progress, which remains a concept distinctly out of place in the *Sylvie and Bruno* stories.

According to Carroll, the inception of the *Sylvie and Bruno* project was his collection of an unrelated amalgamation of spontaneous character and episodic conceits into “a huge unwieldy mass of litterature [sic],” what he termed as “all sorts of odd ideas, and fragments of dialogue, that occurred to me—who knows how?—with a transitory suddenness that left me no choice but to either record them then and there, or to abandon them to oblivion.”\(^{58}\) Carroll admits that the various snatches and fragments bore no sequential relation initially, and that he endeavored for

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\(^{58}\) Lewis Carroll, preface to “Sylvie and Bruno,” 245. On a side note, Carroll’s unusual spelling of the word “literature” was an intentional piece of wordplay, for which he duly apologizes.
ten years to “[string] together” what seemed like a “chaos” of “odds-and-ends” into something akin to a “consecutive story,” but he insists on a stringent anti-Aristotelian approach to the plot during the process: “for the story had to grow out of the incidents, not the incidents out of the story” (246). Everything about the composition of the *Sylvie and Bruno* books bears this sense of disorder and self-conscious experimentation. In fact, Carroll seems acutely dismissive of intentionality or systematic progression, even in his comments on the production of literature. Carroll abjures those tales written by “beginning at the beginning and ending at the end,” equating the stories mechanically churned out “to produce a given amount of fiction in a given time” to the obligatory efforts of slavery. And in contrast to Carlyle’s rendition of the poet as trailblazer for his ever-improving successors, he also appears to regret the mass of imitators who adapted and reformed his formula for the *Alice* stories so much that he created the incommodes hodgepodge that is *Sylvie and Bruno* in an attempt to avoid repeating himself or encouraging imitation.  

59 True originality, Carroll affirms, cannot be achieved through dogged determination or intense concentration: “Perhaps the hardest thing in all literature—at least I have found it so: by no voluntary effort can I accomplish it: I have to take it as it comes—is to write anything original” (247). Implicit in this statement is Carroll’s philosophy on progress itself, as exhibited by the figures with which he peoples his narratives: Carollian characters cannot move forward through any effort of their own; rather, they must remain content to “take it as it comes,” hoping for the best but without the arrogant assumption that they can make the best occur themselves. In other words, Carroll argues—in all of his books, but most intensely in the *Sylvie and Bruno*...  

59 Interestingly, Carroll utilizes some of Carlyle’s metaphoric terminology (along with a Coleridge quotation), which draws from an admittedly common metaphor, in describing his views on the *Alice* imitators, views which appear rather critical of the Carlylean progressive ideal: “I do not know if *Alice in Wonderland* was an original story—I was, at least, no conscious imitator in writing it—but I do know that, since it came out, something like a dozen storybooks have appeared, on identically the same pattern. The path I timidly explored—believing myself to be ‘the first that ever burst into that silent sea’—is now a beaten highroad: all the wayside flowers have long ago been trampled into the dust: and it would be courting disaster for me to attempt that style again” (247).
stories—for a sort of “personal annihilation,” as one of his characters puts it, a disintegration of the very idea of individual agency and consciousness (and thus of progress), whereby one passes out of the limited, linear existence of the isolated self into a multidimensional receptivity, an “eerie state.”

Sylvie and Bruno contains an inordinate number of anti-progressive qualities, beginning with its insistent deconstruction of children’s narrative conventions and its constant reorientation of the narrator to his unstable surroundings. To begin with, Carroll goes so far as to subvert his own dream narrative structure from the Alice books by delaying the bookending “frames”—in which the real world is established as a foil for the bizarre realm to be explored—and opening his story with the dream already well underway. The narrator of Sylvie and Bruno begins his account in the court of Outland in medias res, as though he were completing a comment after a brief interruption. Epitomizing the goal of “personal annihilation,” Carroll’s “historian” dwells among the denizens of Outland like a phantom observer and occasional commentator, a participant in the action only sporadically. Sometimes his descriptions of the goings-on in the court resemble the self-assured, gnostic narrative voice of the traditional fairy tale, such as his detailed explanation for the Chancellor’s manner of rapid speech: “. . . still, large excuse must be made for a man who had passed several years at the Court of Fairyland, and had there acquired

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60 See Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno, 589. The character who gives expression to this sentiment is the Earl of Ainslie, Lady Muriel Orme’s father, during a dialogue on the concept of eternity. Eternity, for the Earl, remains a frightening idea due to its ultimate negation of improvement: with unlimited time, all things can be accomplished, but then time does not stop, and the remainder of eternity can be filled with nothing but ennui: “With nothing more to learn, can one rest content on knowledge, for the eternity yet to be lived through? It has been a very wearying thought to me. I have sometimes fancied one might, in that event, say, ‘It is better not to be’, and pray for personal annihilation—the Nirvana of the Buddhists.”

61 See Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno, 347. In addition to subverting his own frame narrative concept from the Alice books and sublimating moral reform to “innocent merriment,” Carroll occasionally lambasts the didactic fairy tales directly and offers an inverted alternative to the conventional arrangement: “In the first place, I want to know—dear Child who reads this!—why Fairies should always be teaching us to do our duty, and lecturing us when we go wrong, and we should never teach them anything? You can’t mean to say that Fairies are never greedy, or selfish, or cross, or deceitful, because that would be nonsense, you know. Well then, don’t you think they might be all the better for a little lecturing and punishing now and then?”
the almost impossible art of pronouncing five syllables as one” (257). However, at other times, Carroll’s narrator emphasizes his almost complete expositional ignorance of the “other world” to which he has been given his intimate access, though he admits that he is “very clever at drawing conclusions”: “All this was evidently not meant for my ears, but I could scarcely help hearing it . . . I had come to the conclusion by this time that none of the party . . . was in the least able to see me” (256, 259). Carroll’s “historian” thus acts as both informant and sympathetic stand-in for the uninitiated reader, which combines his participant and non-participant status into one bewilderingly unreliable personality. Is the reader to assume the narrator feigns his ignorance and surprise during his numerous forays into Outland / Fairyland? Or is it more likely that the occasional intrusions of the omniscient voice are the untrustworthy anomalies? Carroll does not relieve the dissonance between these two functions of his narrator; instead, we are asked to believe that the “historian” knows both more and less than he acknowledges, which drastically inhibits any sense we may have of his development as a character in the narrative, or of the development of any of the characters he describes. After all, how can he be said to have learned anything if he might have known it all along?

Additionally, Carroll’s manner of shifting between the storylines in contemporary Elveston, England and Outland prevents either of the narratives from progressing along conventional lines. While very little time passes in England during the narrator’s involuntary reveries, whole segments of characters’ lives are skipped over in the Outland story while he remains conscious in actuality.62 Perhaps most alarmingly, the segment of the Outland story in which the Machiavellian Vice-Warden and his insipid wife are expected to realize the wickedness of their ambitions and return power to the rightful ruler—Sylvie and Bruno’s father,

62 For a specific example of Carroll’s narrative synchrony, see Sylvie and Bruno, 414: “‘And all that strange adventure,’ I thought, ‘has occupied the space of a single comma in Lady Muriel’s speech! A single comma, for which the grammarians tell us to “count one”!’”
the Warden—is completely missing from the narrative. After declaring himself Emperor in the Warden’s absence and attempting to usurp Bruno’s place as heir with his own son Uggug, among many other nefarious deeds, the Vice-Warden prematurely bows before the returning Warden and begs his forgiveness. In Outland, no one really learns a lesson, no one gradually comes to understand his faults and actively seeks reform, and no one entertains for long “some thoughts . . . not wholly out of harmony with the graver cadences of Life” (247). After all, Sylvie’s choice of the crimson jewel with its altruistic inscription, “Sylvie will love all,” turns out to be a false choice in the end: due to the manner in which it is arranged on the locket, the inscription can just as easily be read, “All will love Sylvie.” And her father confesses that the red and blue jewels are literally two aspects of the same Locket, which prompts Bruno to ask the pertinent question, “Father, could Sylvie choose a thing from itself?” (665).

In Elveston, the events of the historian’s life progress haltingly, with several gaps during which he returns to London on business. During his conscious moments, however, the historian and his friends engage in somewhat circular Platonic dialogues rife with paradoxes and puns. As many of them involve odd speculations about the meaning and import of ethics, modern technology, and scientific thought, it is tempting to read these extemporaneous exchanges as examples of Ernst Bloch’s Spuren (or “traces”), “as a lingering over strange anecdotes and peculiar experiences, as a recounting of paradoxical destinies, of ironic legends, of objects with unexpected powers . . . .” Despite the winsome tone of much of the banter, however, these discussions do not celebrate the “astonishment” of “an implicit or explicit perception of the future concealed within that which exists.” 63 On the contrary, Carroll appears to be ridiculing the

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resolute futurism of those involved in the “March of Mind” camp. There is a bitterness that cuts through these dialogues rather than a subtext of hope for the progress of the race, and the content is anything but random. For example, Carroll deliberately inverts Herbert Spencer’s famous definition of evolution from *First Principles* (1862); instead of “a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity,” Dr. Arthur Forester asks “a young lady in spectacles, the very embodiment of the March of Mind” if she has any difficulty in “regarding Nature as a process of involution, passing from definite coherent homogeneity to indefinite incoherent heterogeneity” (372, 381). In place of civilization—or evolution, as Spencer sometimes equates the two processes in his writing—Carroll’s irreverent doctor substitutes “involution,” which means a turning inwards, or in mathematical terms, means any operation that returns its original factor, as in negation. Carroll’s characters’ seemingly innocuous wordplay all too often contains such subtle jabs at the Victorian notions of progress and improvement, and contrary to the conventional norm of children’s literature, whereby the flaws of the real world are critiqued through the characters and events of the fantasy realm, Carroll’s subversive wordplay occurs almost exclusively in actuality in *Sylvie and Bruno*. In fact, through these dialogues rather than a subtext of hope for the progress of the race, and the content is anything but random. 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in the portions of the novel that take place in Carroll’s ostensible “real world,” very little else occurs at all.

Contrary to the expectations mandated by their generic classification, Carroll’s copious Sylvie and Bruno tales do not set forth any pattern of consistent, recognizable progression for their characters or for the definite ideas discussed or embraced by them. Instead of a gradual improvement, with “possibilities for the young to transform themselves and society into those Arcadian dreams conceived in childhood,” Carroll’s alleged fairy stories contain a series of disconnected, capricious debates on seminal Victorian issues, interspersed with lapses into whimsy and absurdity in a Fairyland without a discernible moral code. The historian discusses the detrimental effects of railway travel with Lady Muriel, who in turn mulls over the science of teleology with Arthur, who later expounds upon his theories regarding the proper relationship of wealth to labor in a class-based community, all within the tenuous generic boundaries of the children’s fairy story, but no issue is ever truly resolved before the historian slips into another of his narcolepsies, replacing topical closure with absurd ambiguity. Carroll does not even allow his eponymous fairy-children a determined status within the tale. Apparently, they move between fantasy and reality via the same trance-like “eerie state” as the historian, but in the opening chapter of Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, after many dealings with the children in both Outland and the real world, the historian admits his confusion over their true identities: “. . . but, perhaps more than all, I missed the companionship of the two Fairies—or Dream-Children, for I had not yet solved the problem as to who or what they were . . . .” (465). As a result of constant

67 See Carroll, “Sylvie and Bruno Concluded,” in The Complete Illustrated Lewis Carroll (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 1996), 664. All subsequent citations of this work will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically. The one possible exception to this claim would be Captain Eric Lindon’s eleventh-hour declaration of faith in the power of prayer after Arthur’s unlikely rescue from death: “‘And—and’—his voice broke, and I could only just catch the concluding words, ‘there is a God who answers prayer! I know it for certain now.’”
movement between ontological realms and an almost complete lack of plot determination on either side of the dimensional divide, most of Carroll’s characters never attain coherence in the *Sylvie and Bruno* tales. Instead, they provide constant resistance to categorization, maintaining characteristics from mutually exclusive classifications, such as human / fairy, human / animal, child / adult, etc. As Uri Margolin notes, such radical differences enclosed in individual characters obstructs reader comprehension and thus development or progression:

In extreme cases, the new information contrasts directly with the defining features of the selected category, causing schema disruption, decategorization of the individual (= we no longer think of him or her as the same “kind of person”), the invalidation of previous inferences and the focused search for a new, better fitting category. . . . Finally, an individual may display simultaneously radically incongruent category features, preventing any overall integration or closure.\(^{69}\)

Rather than integrating into increasingly recognizable and predictable wholes, Carroll’s characters continuously dis-integrate, shattering as they do so all “previous inferences” as to their current status or future actions in the narrative. Individuals come and go between worlds with an almost complete lack of regulation, sometimes mixing one or two actual persons with a whole host of fairy people, and once inserting one odd fairy-man, whose identity and origin are never revealed, into a social setting in the real world. Such characters resist systematic readings and deny the reader sufficient “closure” concerning their motivations, moral developments, or even fundamental identities.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{70}\) See Michael Holquist, “What is a Boojum?: Nonsense and Modernism,” *Yale French Studies* 43 (1969): 145-164. Although little, if any, criticism has noted the similarity, Carroll’s impressionist rendering of characters who appear as one recognizable shape only to elude definition and assume a completely different shape moments later (cf. the baby-turned-pig and the White Queen/sheep from the *Alice* books) resembles the narrative descriptions of the early modernists, particularly Joseph Conrad. Conrad’s characters fluctuate widely between original impression and
Indeed, Carroll’s characters often voice their surprise at the others’ (and their own) ineffability and unpredictability. For instance, when the historian notices one of his acquaintances from Outland ambling up to meet him in the real world and simultaneously notices Lady Muriel’s awareness of his presence, he balks at the situation’s irrationality and vainly searches for an explanation: “What was to be done? Had the fairy-life been merged in the real life? Or was Lady Muriel ‘eerie’ also, and thus able to enter into the fairy-world along with me?” (511). The unformed character undulates like a distant tree in a heat mirage, first assuming one identity and then another: “the figure outside seemed to be changing at every moment, like one of the shapes in a kaleidoscope: now he was the Professor, and now he was somebody else!” (512). Additionally, the historian occasionally calls attention to his own radical spontaneity, announcing the impending arrival of Sylvie and Bruno at Lady Muriel’s soiree “with a feeling of utter amazement” at his own words: “‘That was not my remark. I didn’t say it, and it isn’t true!’” (527). And earlier, in keeping with the metafictional character analysis of the incredulous historian, Arthur and Lady Muriel blithely discuss the unreliable nature of language in relating an individual personality, echoing Saussure and Jameson in their assertion that all language communicates both identity and its opposite simultaneously: “But the shyest and most intermittent talker must seem fluent in letter-writing. He may have taken half an hour to compose his second sentence; but there it is, close after the first” (520). Arthur’s point is that written subsequent observation, and their interior lives and true identities often remain obscure throughout his novels. Hence, Lord Jim “passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart” and Kurtz appears to be “an impenetrable darkness.” Holquist does not note the impressionist qualities of Carroll’s characterization, but he does claim a definite link between Carroll and a host of modern, post-modern, and surrealist authors: “Pausing to reflect on this, the association of Lewis Carroll with modern literature seemed natural enough: his name figures in the first Surrealist manifesto (1924) . . . . Joyce’s use of portmanteau words, without which there would be no Finnegans Wake, is only one index of his high regard for Carroll . . . .”

71 See Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 35: “The movement of Saussure’s thought may perhaps be articulated as follows: language is not an object, not a substance, but rather a value: thus language is a perception of identity. But in language the perception of identity is the same as the perception of difference; thus every linguistic perception holds in its mind at the same time an awareness of its own opposite.”
language cannot explicitly convey a laconic personality as completely as verbal communication can (nor can it accurately denote the passing of time), but the irony of the fictional situation is not lost on Carroll, who plays with his own writing’s inability to express real personality through dialogue in the exchange between Lady Muriel and her fiancé:

“Of course, when I hear anyone talking—you, for instance—I can see how desperately shy he is! But can you see that in a letter?”

“Well, of course, when you hear anyone talk fluently—you, for instance—you can see how desperately un-shy she is—not to say saucy!” (520)

Carroll deliberately uses an almost identical sentence structure in the two characters’ remarks to highlight how indistinguishable they are from one another with mere words to define them; only the gendered pronouns “he” and “she” provide a clue to “reading” these characters. The “fluent” talker seems of a kind with the “shy” talker when they are rendered via the unstable medium of written language. Thus, shyness and its opposite appear identical in writing, so fiction cannot accurately convey consistent, reliable personalities (or anything else, for that matter). To drive his point home, Carroll follows this confusing exchange with Arthur’s confirmed desire for a method to disavow meaning altogether in “Letter-writing”: “‘Well, another thing greatly needed, little girl, is some way of expressing that we don’t mean anything’” (520).

Of course, in addition to their subversion of development through character disintegration, the *Sylvie and Bruno* stories contain several episodes dealing with time and its various paradoxes, and these, too, question the notion of viable progress with its connotative qualities of individual and social improvement. True to convention, Carroll’s “Outlanders”

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72 Substituting a deficit of meaning for an infinite dearth of meanings, Arthur’s sentiment builds upon and reverses Humpty Dumpty’s linguistic relativism in *Through the Looking-Glass*. During his conversation with Alice, the erudite egg advances Saussure’s theory of words as arbitrary signs for socially (or in his case, individually) determined meanings: “‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less’” (163).
provide the most direct commentary on the humorous flaws of the human race, but contrary to convention, their allegedly wise or magical alternatives provide no real solution to the problems they so readily identify. For instance, the historian receives a “Magic Watch” from the Professor during one of his visits to Outland, an item that not only reputedly operates independent of time, but actually serves as a sort of Greenwich Mean Time determiner for universal time: “It goes, of course, at the usual rate. Only the time has to go with it. Hence, if I move the hands, I change the time” (408). The historian learns that to move the watch ahead into the future is impossible, but that one can use it to “move as much as a month backwards” and relive events again “with any alterations experience may suggest.” In other words, the watch is an instrument of historical improvement, a means to right the wrongs of the past via “alterations” to create a better present and future, relying on the indelible guidance of “experience.” Yet when the historian attempts to use the watch to rectify a simple bicycle accident—in the vein of a true champion of progress, he marvels at the “human suffering” he has “annihilated” in preventing the accident—he discovers that the instrument’s powers have definite limits. The watch can only solve historical errors or accidents temporarily, or until its hands again reach the moment when it was set back, whereupon everything reverts to the original timeline and any “alterations” are instantaneously undone. Unnerved by the failure of the “mocking Magic Watch,” the historian grudgingly admits, “‘The good I fancied I could do is vanished like a dream: the evil of this troublesome world is the only abiding reality!’” (425). The historian’s “golden dream” of “worldwide benevolence” disappears as history reasserts its dominance over the watch, and experience fails again as a tool in fashioning a better future out of the events of today. Even the “delightful power of magic” in the Professor’s watch has no lasting ability to solve history’s problems and improve conditions for mankind, who must live in a world where “evil . . . is the only abiding reality.”
Carroll’s skepticism of historical, social progress becomes most apparent in the sections of *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* involving the strange character known only as “Mein Herr.” As Sylvie and Bruno refer to the historian as “Mister Sir” during his appearances in Outland, one might argue that “Mein Herr” is an obverse or counterpart to the historian, a visitor from an unnamed country with satirically similar (and implicitly critical) ideas and practices to those of nineteenth-century England. This mysterious visitor offers a bleak commentary on several subjects pertinent to late Victorian readers: among many other topics, he touches on evolutionary theory, education, and parliamentary reform, three issues at the heart of the Victorian impulse toward social and individual progress. During Mein Herr’s discourse on “Artificial Selection,” he informs his listeners that the people of his country have employed the principle by “‘selecting the lightest people: so that, now, everybody is lighter than water’” in order to end death by drowning. Unfortunately, drowning still occurs in burning theatres, which are filled with water to extinguish the fires, and where the victims “‘have the comfort of knowing that, whether drowned or not, they are all lighter than water’” (544). Thus, artificial selection fails to eradicate undesirable outcomes, and when Bruno asks what happens to “‘the peoples that’s too heavy,’” Mein Herr is noticeably evasive and quick to change the subject, hinting at the darker side of progress, which, as Joseph Conrad remarks, “leaves its dead by the way.”

Turning to education, the strange old man describes a tautological system in which the instructors grow so obscure and difficult to understand that their students “‘couldn’t make head

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73 See Jerome H. Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 8. Buckley’s apologetics on behalf of the Victorian preoccupation with “perfectibility” include references to these specific issues, which suggests their centrality within the nineteenth-century intellectual marketplace: “The notion of perfectibility would seem to have some immediate sanction at a time when men were devising a system of education on a broad democratic basis, establishing the rights of free speech and trade unionism, progressively extending the franchise, reshaping their entire legal code, and discovering the principles of a medical science by which the sum of human suffering might be immeasurably reduced.”

or tail’” of their knowledge and succumb to mere rote memorization and repetition.

Significantly, the subject taught by Mein Herr’s exemplary pedagogue is “Moral Philosophy,” and he admits the cycle of memorization without explanation produced an intellectual vacuum: “‘We woke up one fine day, and found there was no one in the place that knew anything about Moral Philosophy’” (552). The educational system that worships the obscurities and convolutions of progressive thought, Carroll argues, dooms itself to redundancy and vapidity. In place of a systematic approach to moral inculcation, Mein Herr’s culture substitutes an individual heuristic: “‘And if anyone wanted to learn anything about [Moral Philosophy], he had to make it out for himself . . . .’” (552). The only way to achieve legitimate moral knowledge, in other words, is through trial and error, by living one’s life and picking up what little scraps of wisdom one’s experience of associating with other human beings leaves behind. The implication of such a claim, of course, is that any approach to moral education involving gratuitous sophistication or casuistry, such as those promulgated by many of the social philosophers and reformers of the day, men like Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Carlyle, results in an automatous, vacuous morality, where no one understands the principles to which they adhere.

Mein Herr also ridicules the parliamentarian political process, which he characterizes as an endless occlusion between the “Government” and its perennial foe, the “Opposition.” Mein Herr’s country proceeds to implement this practice of polemics, which they dub “the glorious principle of British Dichotomy,” into every aspect of their citizens’ lives (563-4). After bogging down the country’s executive and legislative processes in the quagmire of perpetual debate, Mein Herr’s countrymen apply “the British Principle” to agriculture, with the following ridiculous outcome:
“While the thing lasted, there were funny sights to be seen! Why, I’ve often watched a ploughman, with two horses harnessed to the plough, doing his best to get it forwards; while the opposition-ploughman, with three donkeys harnessed at the other end, was doing his best to get it backwards! And the plough never moving an inch, either way!”

(564)

Forward movement assumes a literal guise in this “cultural” allegory, and Carroll’s use of a plough cutting through soil to denote the progress of the “Government” or even the “Nation” toward some idealized future is hardly coincidental. As Raymond Williams notes, British essayists and social critics had for many years used agricultural terminology to describe the intellectual and moral growth of their society and its institutions, and Carroll is merely capitalizing on this metaphorical connection in order to register his doubts regarding the process’s ultimate feasibility. In accordance with legitimate political procedure, the two parties approach their task with different methodologies—note the “two horses” one on side and the “three donkeys” on the other—but neither approach succeeds in causing the plough to advance in any direction. Therefore, civilization has no hope for forward movement or for “cultivation” if its lawmakers cannot resolve their self-interested, partisan disputes.

Although both Sylvie and Bruno books conclude with somewhat stereotypical admonitions to love one another and to maintain hope for the future, the haphazard content of the stories, when coupled with their continuous polemical digressions on a large and diverse gamut

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75 See Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 61-3. Beginning with Coleridge and moving on through almost every major Victorian cognoscente, Williams follows the use of the word “cultivation” as it comes to “denote a general condition, ‘a state or habit’ of the mind”: “… Coleridge is trying to set up a standard of ‘health’, to which a more certain appeal may be made than to the ‘mixed good’ of ‘civilization’. He defines this standard in the word cultivation—the first time, in fact, that this word had been used to denote a general condition, ‘a state or habit’ of the mind. The word depends, of course, on the force of the important eighteenth-century adjective cultivated. What Coleridge here calls cultivation was elsewhere, as in Mill, to be called culture. … The standard of perfection, of ‘the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity’, was now available, not merely to influence society, but to judge it.”
of topics, derails any cohesive moral trajectory the narratives might have possessed. The books rather resemble the Professor’s and Bruno’s extemporaneous “Fables,” which have missing or disconnected “Lessons”: “‘I’ll tell oo a Fable!’ Bruno began in a great hurry. ‘Once there were a Locust, and a Magpie, and a Engine-driver. And the Lesson is, to learn to get up early—’” (659). Although the maudlin conclusion of *Sylvie and Bruno* seems to endorse an unbridled ambition and feverish industry as the best salves for immediate sorrow, one must remember that Arthur does not travel to India, where “his great generous soul” can give vent to its “noble ambition.” He remains in England, where he appears to have sacrificed his life tending the needs of the small fishing village near Elveston during its bout with infectious disease, only to turn up miraculously at the end of *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, slightly the worse for his near-death experience. Thus, Carroll’s message, whatever it may be, remains jumbled and overwhelmed by the various locusts, magpies, and engine-drivers of his copious “fable,” in whose pages progress and development warrant nothing but sustained skepticism and even occasional ridicule.

“*The Vanishing*”: Futile Quests and the Annihilation of Meaning in *The Hunting of the Snark*

To focus and summarize the tendencies I have heretofore ascribed to Carroll’s narrative prose—that is, its reluctance to depict any successful, consistent, or coherent program of progress or measureable development at the level of plot, character, or even language—I briefly examine these tendencies at work in what is arguably his most famous and frustrating piece of

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76 See Lewis Carroll, *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, 2:885-6. Although Carroll does seem to have had something weightier in mind than what he refers to as “mere fun” for his *Sylvie and Bruno* books, he has some difficulty in articulating that more substantial subject matter. In a belated response to a letter praising his most recent work, Carroll attempts to relate his motivations in writing his longest work of fiction: “In *Sylvie and Bruno* I took courage to introduce, what I had entirely avoided in the two *Alice* books, some reference to subjects which are after all the *only* subjects of real interest in life; subjects which are so intimately bound up with every topic of human interest, that it needs more effort to avoid them than to touch on them.” And in a subsequent correspondence with Mrs. George MacDonald, Carroll again eschews any definite outline of his book’s potentially moral or didactic purpose: “Whether [*Sylvie and Bruno*] is better, or worse, than the *Alice* books, I have no idea: but I take a far deeper interest in it, as having tried to put more real thought into it.”
nonsense, the mock-epic ballad *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876). Since its publication, Carroll’s poem about a motley crew of professionals and their ill-advised quest in search of a strange and dangerous beast has accumulated a plethora of allegorical interpretations. Although Carroll was cleverly obtuse about the poem’s alleged “moral purpose,” he candidly admitted its relative lack of intentional meaning in an 1897 letter to Mary Barber, an admiring reader:

> In answer to your question, ‘What did you mean the Snark was?’ will you tell your friend that I meant that the Snark was a *Boojum*. . . . To the best of my recollection, I had no other meaning in my mind when I wrote it: but people have since tried to find the meanings in it. The one I like best (which I think is partly my own) is that it may be taken as an Allegory for the Pursuit of Happiness.77

Carroll’s initial explanation is profoundly circular, turning Ms. Barber’s question into a simple point of clarification concerning his poem’s insular lexicon of “Snarks,” “Boojums,” “antediluvian tones,” and “uffish” expressions.78 However, he then qualifies his relativist position by assuming partial responsibility for an allegorical interpretation that may be “partly [his] own,” in which the Snark hunt represents mankind’s implicitly futile pursuit of happiness, or contentedness, in this life.79 Inherent in such futility is the suggestion that one’s social progress achieves nothing lasting, and neither does one’s personal ambition. Indeed, the fifth and final of the Snark’s distinguishing characteristics is “ambition,” which, as Carroll notes, “works

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78 See Lewis Carroll, “Alice on the Stage” in *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 280-2. Carroll describes the inception of the *Snark* project as a spontaneous revelation, during which the concluding line of the poem “came of itself,” fully formed, into his conscious mind: “I was walking on a hillside, alone, one bright summer day, when suddenly there came into my head one line of verse—one solitary line—‘For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.’ I knew not what it meant, then: I know not what it means, now; but I wrote it down . . . . And since then, periodically I have received courteous letters from strangers, begging to know whether “The Hunting of the Snark” is an allegory, or contains some hidden moral, or is a political satire: and for all such questions I have but one answer, ‘I don’t know!’”
79 Interestingly, the Bellman indirectly admits the futility of the quest when he informs his crew that the Snark possesses “a flavour of Will-o-the-Wisp” (224).
well into this theory” of the poem’s allegorical rendition of the pursuit of happiness topos.\footnote{See Lewis Carroll, The Letters of Lewis Carroll, 2:1113.}

Perhaps the more contentious idea, however, is that the admittedly discursive and systematic nonsense of *The Hunting of the Snark* encapsulates not only a quest for an elusive, unreachable goal, but also a deliberate reversal of character development and progression through space-time not at all dissimilar from the disintegration and nonlinear chronology of his prose works.\footnote{See Holquist, “What is a Boojum?: Nonsense and Modernism,” 150. Holquist insists on Carroll’s nonsense as an ordered system, as opposed to random absurdity or chaos, based partly on his claim that Carroll / Dodgson was a man with an obsessive “lust for order.” Whereas I agree with Holquist’s affirmation of the hermeneutic ambivalence of Carroll’s poem, I hesitate to agree with his major contention that the poem bears no relation to anything outside its own rigidly self-referential “system of signs”: “For nonsense, in the writings of Lewis Carroll, at any rate, does not mean gibberish; it is not chaos, but the opposite of chaos. It is a closed field of language in which the meaning of any single unit is dependent on its relationship to the system of the other constituents. . . . [*The Hunting of the Snark*] is its own system of signs which gain their meaning by constantly dramatizing their differences from signs in other systems.”}

In light of his basic centrality to the events of the poem, the ostensible “hero” of the piece is most probably the Baker, the nameless, forgetful character who provides the work’s chillingly nihilistic climax. From his first appearance in the poem until his precipitous “vanishing” at its end, the Baker proves an almost completely indecipherable character. He leaves all of his possessions behind, wears several layers of disparate clothing, and having “wholly forgotten his name,” he answers to a wide variety of monikers during the voyage, none of which bear any real or consistent correlation to his identity: the other hunters refer to him via interjectory exclamations like “Ho!” or “Hi!”, while some choose equally random names for him like “Candle-ends” or “Toasted Cheese” (221). Even the title of Baker proves useless when he admits that he can “only bake Bride-cake—for which . . . no materials were to be had” (221). Similarly, the few definite qualities he is said to possess come under serious doubt during the course of the poem. For example, the Bellman declares that “his courage is perfect” (221), but he faints almost immediately at the mere mention of a “Boojum” and admits to his incapacitating terror at encountering such a creature: “And my heart is like nothing so much as a bowl / Brimming over...
with quivering curds!” (225). Bit by bit, the nebulous character of the Baker grows less precise as the poem advances, terminating in his complete disappearance at the end, when the Boojum-Snark causes him to “softly and suddenly vanish away” (225, 234). The Baker’s “vanishing” provides a very literal rendering of the Earl of Ainslie’s “personal annihilation”: it marks the point beyond which the individual “cannot endure” (226), the existential terminus that ends ambition, hope, growth, and certainly progress. As Martin Gardner notes, the Boojum’s eradicative act represents something far more significant than a single death; it stands for Carroll’s peculiar form of nihilism, of the eradication of meaning itself and the ultimate dissolution of purpose: “The Boojum is more than death. It is the end of all searching. It is final, absolute extinction. In a literal sense, Carroll’s Boojum means nothing at all.”82 Here again we have what Hillis Miller describes as the Nietzschean endgame, the total annihilation of directed action, of movement toward anything, when all motion devolves to random, capricious wandering “through an ‘infinite nothingness,’” and when purpose disappears, individual agency dissolves into meaninglessness.

In what is perhaps one of Carroll’s most famous lines, we learn that the Bellman’s ship has the peculiar tendency to sail backwards, due to some confusion over the relative positions of its rudder and bowsprit: “Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes . . . And the Bellman, perplexed and distressed, / Said he had hoped, at least, when the wind blew due East, / That the ship would not travel due West!” (223). Accordingly, the Bellman’s map is a complete blank, “Without the least vestige of land,” due to standard maps being comprised of “merely conventional signs” like “North Poles and Equators, / Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines” (222). In the figure of the featureless map, Carroll has created his anti-progressive manifesto.

Without representative landmasses, the crew has no objective to sail toward, and without meridian lines or the equator, they have no means of checking their progress. The Bellman’s sailing orders are equally pointless: he demands that the ship steer to the right but remain heading left, bewildering his poor helmsman. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, direction has no meaning on the Snark-hunt because space is homogeneous. Similarly, time appears to have slowed to a halt during the hunt, as the entire poem takes place during an extended dusk. The Bellman curtly abbreviates the Baker’s tale because of the lateness of the hour, and during the Butcher and Beaver expedition, “the evening got darker and colder” (228). The Banker dons “full evening dress” after his encounter with the Bandersnatch (233), and in the final “fit,” the hunters quicken their pace “For the daylight was nearly past” (234). Like the Hatter’s tea party, the events of the *Snark* seem to take place in a temporal loop, where “it’s always six o’clock now” and where the same hunting cry opens the last four fits without modulation.

In an obscure little piece entitled “A Hemispherical Problem,” which originally appeared as a part of Carroll’s collection of brain-teasers, *Mischmasch and Other Puzzles* (1882), the author discusses a manufactured paradox concerning the transition point (both temporal and spatial) between one day and the next. “Where, then” Carroll queries, “in its passage round the earth, does the day change its name? Where does it lose its identity?” Carroll postulates that if the world was covered in a single, connected landmass, then an individual could circumambulate the globe in perpetual sunlight, and he points out the difficulty such an existence would pose to determining one’s progress through history:

. . . in that case either there would be no distinction at all between each successive day, and so week, month, etc., so that we should have to say, ‘The Battle of Waterloo happened today, about two million hours ago,’ or some line would have to be fixed where
the change should take place, so that the inhabitants of one house would wake and say, ‘Heigh-ho, Tuesday morning!’ and the inhabitants of the next (over the line), a few miles to the west would wake a few minutes afterwards and say, ‘Heigh-ho, Wednesday morning!’

Here, encapsulated in one whimsical hypothesis, is the problem of progress explored in practically all of Carroll’s writings in one form or another. Can we in any way mark our movement through time and space without resorting to “conventional signs”? And if not, can we really have made any definite progress? Where and when does that mysterious moment occur that marks one’s development from one state of being to the next, supposedly sequential and/or higher, state of being? Where does the changing individual “lose its identity”? During her conversation with the Caterpillar, Alice highlights this confusion when she cannot provide an answer to his simple request for identification, “‘Who are you?’: “‘I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then’” (35). Like identity, choice is illusory in Carroll’s worlds, as both directions beyond the Cheshire Cat’s tree lead to madness, and the separate signs indicating the residences of Tweedledee and Tweedledum always point down the same road, even when the road divides. And progress, particularly social progress, becomes an exercise in perpetual futility in Mein Herr’s speech in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*: “‘. . . yet something tells me that we are further on than you in the eternal cycle of change—and that many a theory we have tried and found to fail, you will also try, with a wilder enthusiasm: you also will find to fail, with a bitterer despair!’” (548). The “cycle of change” is “eternal” and contains little to warrant hope and optimism for the future. However, though recorded history may be a continuous loop of failed

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theories, one cannot renounce one’s obligations to time. Like the frightened Baker in *The Hunting of the Snark*, all of Carroll’s characters are told repeatedly that they are “wasting time” and “have hardly a minute to waste,” but the reasons for their expedited existences are never revealed. As a result of all of these constraints, Alice and her fictional counterparts hurtle unremittingly through space and time, but like the Queen’s race through the Second Square, they make no progress whatsoever.

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84 See Lewis Carroll, *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, 2:1100. Toward the end of his life, Carroll’s anxiety over making the most of his time by being productive with his writing escalates, indicating the profound pressures his culture placed on industrious living and the importance of impressing posterity: “I am beginning to realise that, if the books I am still hoping to write, are to be done at all, they must be done now, and that I am meant thus to utilise the splendid health I have had, unbroken, for the last year and a half, and the working-powers, that are fully as great as, if not greater than, what I have ever had.”
CHAPTER IV

DANGEROUS MORALS: PROGRESS AND HEGEMONY IN OSCAR WILDE’S FAIRY TALES

It is through disobedience that progress had been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.
– Oscar Wilde, The Soul of Man Under Socialism

In his multivalent essay on the promise of socialist philosophy entitled The Soul of Man under Socialism (1890), Wilde sets forth his thoughts on the primacy of Individualism, the abolition of private property, and the evils of authority. He states repeatedly that compulsory standards of behavior, under which the insecure personage of authority is “always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself,” cannot provide the means to achieve an Individualism unhindered by hypocrisy and materialism. Conventional morality, Wilde implies, does nothing to bring about this revolution of Individualism, but rather recodifies the system already in place: charity to the poor, in this light, becomes tantamount to political oppression, limiting the potential personalities of both the philanthropist and his miserable charge. “Charity,” Wilde writes, appears in the eyes of the poor to be “a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives” (1081). Thus, any charitable measure that involves the superficial transposition of material wealth from one social class to another, especially when that exchange carries with it some precept of compulsory morality, actually generates more social problems than it solves: “Charity creates a multitude of sins” (1079).

Echoing the principles of his philosophical essay, Wilde’s works of fiction and drama explore and confront the many inconsistencies and inhumanities of a society that glorifies

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1 Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 1079-1104, 1084. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically.
altruism and selflessness while its economic operation of industrial capitalism exemplifies the opposite moral viewpoint. Particularly in the two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Wilde develops his criticism of moral hypocrisy into a thematic keynote, creating characters who subscribe—either willingly or through coercion—to the exacting standards of a nineteenth-century interpretation of Judeo-Christian ethics and completely lose their individuality in the process. For Wilde, the full realization of the individual personality—what he terms “Individualism”—remains the terminal utopia on the map of progress.\(^2\) If, as he writes, “progress is the realization of Utopias” (1089), and if, as he also writes, “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism” (1080), then we can extrapolate that Wilde views Individualism as a utopian ideal and that his ultimate goal for civilization involves the disintegration of society itself, along with all of its myriad forms of control and authority.\(^3\) In Wilde’s utopia, machines will perform the unpleasant jobs of necessity while men and women are free to choose their own work in accordance with their interests. The newly dissolved “State” will be reconstituted as a “voluntary association that will organise labour, and be the manufacturer and distributer of necessary commodities” (1088).\(^4\) In the radiance of uninhibited Individualism, each person will allow his morality to mature organically, and jealousy and discontent will disappear forever. Wilde’s conviction of the basic good of unadulterated humanity precludes the possibility that his

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\(^2\) See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1100-01. Wilde equates Individualism with evolution, declaring that as evolution represents “the law of life,” Individualism is the *telos* of evolution itself, “the point to which all development tends.”

\(^3\) See Richard Ellman, “Wilde as Criminologist,” in *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 325-30, 328. Ellman outlines Wilde’s incipient “anarchism” in “Soul of Man”: “For the artist the best government is none at all, and here Wilde seems to be advocating anarchism rather than socialism. ‘I am something of an anarchist,’ he told an interviewer in 1894.”

\(^4\) See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1087-8. Wilde’s socialist “State” will have to dissolve as a governmental institution because, as he asserts, “all modes of government are failures” due to their inevitable reliance on authority and conformation of law.
philosophy might simply result in moral apathy or solipsism, the loss of any sense of obligation or even regard for one’s fellow human beings.\(^5\)

In such an impossible future, the idea of an affiliation of culturally similar people bonded loosely together by common principles and expectations (i.e. society) would inevitably collapse. Accordingly, in this chapter I present Wilde as the diametric counterpart to a writer like George MacDonald, as one who insists on the unmitigated freedom of individual development at the expense of social progress, as achieved through a process that critics Jody Price and Jack Zipes, among others, refer to as “socialization.”\(^6\) I argue that Wilde’s stories depict what happens when the rigid constraints of conventional morality and propriety prevent an individual from fully realizing his personality. Arguably, Wilde’s tales allow for neither individual nor social progress, as his artistic individuals never achieve their true potential due to the social (and narrative) constraints of moral reformation, and the societies of his narratives thus receive no inspiration from their more culturally enriched members. In contrast to the critical tradition, I disavow any moral didacticism in Wilde’s fairy tales, arguing instead for a subversive or ironic reading of these narratives of ostensible homiletics, wherein, for instance, the destruction of the statue of the Happy Prince—and not the ubiquitous poverty that surrounds him—is the real tragedy of the

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\(^5\) Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1100-1101. Wilde advocates a sort of \textit{laissez-faire} form of morality, wherein an individual realizes “good” in his own way as a side effect of the development of his personality: “And so, Individualism exercises no compulsion over man. On the contrary, it says to man that he should suffer no compulsion to be exercised over him. It does not try to force people to be good. It knows that people are good when they are let alone.”

\(^6\) See Jody Price, “Framework for a Transgressive Theory,” in “A Map with Utopia”: Oscar Wilde’s Theory for Social Transformation, American University Studies Ser. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 41-73, 67-9. Price suggests that the characters in Wilde’s fairy tales display a certain resistance to the “dominant culture” with its tendency to assimilate and control any “fragmented” or anomalous individuals. The Dwarf in “The Birthday of the Infanta,” for example, “intuitively senses the oppressiveness of socialization and rejects it,” and the Fisherman in “The Fisherman and His Soul” “undergoes a transformation which forces him to reject his socialization and rethink his ideals.” See also Jack Zipes, “Inverting and Subverting the World with Hope: The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, and L. Frank Baum,” in Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion (New York: Routledge, 1983), 97-133, 112. Zipes affirms that Wilde’s early exposure to his parents’ social circle taught him how effective satire can undermine the staunchest social conventions, “and he learned to explore alternatives to stifling forms of socialization at a very early age.”
tale. At least one critic, Jack Zipes, has recognized Wilde’s fairy tales for the covert critiques of Victorian morality that they are, but even Zipes attempts to compromise Wilde’s vision of social disintegration by giving his tales a quasi-Christian, fundamentally socialist utopian aim, involving “a collective building of paradise on earth.” In contrast, I maintain that Wilde’s idea of Individualism—as communicated in the stories of the fairy tale collections and in his other short works of fiction, which Christopher Nassaar has rightly classified as modified fairy tales—implies the complete dissolution of society as a viable, evolving entity. Wilde’s tales denigrate all social standards of behavior and instruments of control or conformity, relegating moral development in the vaunted Victorian modes of “duty” and “self-sacrifice” to the lowest, most counter-progressive level of the individual personality: “It is to be noted that Individualism does not come to the man with any sickly cant about duty, which merely means doing what other people want because they want it; or any hideous cant about self-sacrifice, which is merely a survival of savage mutilation” (*SOMUS* 1100).

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7 For only a few examples of the critical tendency to ascribe deliberate moralism to Wilde’s fairy tales and other writings, see John A. Quintus, “The Moral Prerogative in Oscar Wilde: A Look at the Fairy Tales,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 53 (1977): 708-17, 708, 717: “But largely critics have emphasized aestheticism, Satanism, decadence, and degeneration in Wilde’s work and have hesitated to allow that the real Oscar, underneath the masks and poses, was a Victorian gentleman who could not altogether escape a Victorian predilection to preach—indeed, to be moralistic. . . . ‘The Soul of Man’ is clearly a moral tract from start to finish. Its criticism of the wealthy and powerful stung many of Wilde’s admirers. Its invitation to selfhood and its advocacy of individualism and aesthetic sensibility evince a strong moral tone designed not only to pique Wilde’s readers but ultimately to improve his country’s attitude toward the downtrodden.” See also Naomi Wood, “Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales,” *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 2 (2002): 156-170, 156: “Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales rhetorically create a new, morally sensual child by enacting Walter Pater’s aesthetics.” For a more contemporary example, see also Sarah Marsh, “Twice upon a Time: The Importance of Rereading “The Devoted Friend,”” *Children’s Literature* 36 (2008): 72-87, 73-4: “Wilde’s debt to Andersen, as well as to the Grimm, is evidence of an effort to unsettle the instructions of these older fairy tales and articulate to the British public a new moral code consistent with his developing socialist politics.”


9 See Christopher Nassaar, “The Fairy Tales,” in *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1-36, 12, 21. Nassaar discusses both “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (1887) and “The Canterville Ghost” (1887) in terms of their fairy tale elements, though I would argue against his suggestion that they fit into the genre because they contain a developmental trajectory that moves their characters from lower to higher innocence.
Beginning with “The Happy Prince” and its title character’s ineffective philanthropic campaign, which results in his own mutilation and second death—he is already dead at the story’s beginning, but his acts of charity bring about the secondary death of his image—as well as the death of his companion the swallow, and continuing through the dire epilogue to “The Star-Child,” Wilde’s fairy tales denounce the pain and ugliness associated with an epistemology dependent on nineteenth-century moral standards. Nevertheless, his critics have clung tenaciously to their interpretation of Wilde’s exhortative purpose in writing the tales, beginning with early twentieth-century readers like Wilfred M. Leadman of the Westminster Review: “Not that Wilde’s outlook was always unusual. On the contrary, some of his short stories—especially ‘The Happy Prince,’ ‘The Star-child,’ and ‘The Model Millionaire’—though necessarily tinted with his peculiar colouring, would satisfy the most exacting moralist by their tone of ‘poetic justice.’”10 Characteristically, in response to an overly literal and prosaic reading of his story “The Nightingale and the Rose,” Wilde denies that his work contains any unilateral message, moral or otherwise: “… but I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it, and the others, I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets, many answers.”11 However, when confronted with the loaded question of his intended audience for A House of Pomegranates in an anonymous review in the Pall Mall Gazette, Wilde famously replied that “[he] had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as [he] had of pleasing the British public,” indicating that his stories were not aimed at providing a wholesome lesson for their readers, but that his

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artistic sensibility transcended such “standard[s]” of moral or popular appeal: “No artist recognizes any standard of beauty but that which is suggested by his own temperament.”

Similarly, Wilde’s essays on art and criticism in *Intentions* (1891) are replete with examples of his prioritization of Individualism over social mandates of behavior. For instance, Wilde’s admittedly hyperbolic conversant in “The Critic as Artist”—the erudite sensationalist philosopher called Gilbert—repeatedly affirms the primacy of an individual’s developing aesthetic taste over his moral sensibility: “Æsthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong.”

Although Gilbert’s concluding remarks proceed to relate the untold wonders of a naively utopian world of fully realized individuals who have finally arrived at “the true culture that is our aim,” the salient point remains that, in this vision of the future, only individual development matters. The often basely material progress of social institutions like the State or the Church, under Wilde’s aesthetic revolution, typically impedes the perfectibility of the soul, and as such, it must be subjugated to the will of the enlightened individual. Philosophically, Wilde aligns himself here with Nietzsche—and thus Plato—whose perspective on morality as a derivative system inherited from previous generations that should remain open to evaluation and analysis mirrors Wilde’s skeptical treatment of received, coded behaviors like duty and compulsory moral tenets like asceticism and self-sacrifice. Wilde was a great student of

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12 For the full text of the anonymous review, see “Unsigned Review, *Pall Mall Gazette,*” in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, 113-4. The reviewer remarks that Wilde’s florid prose, when combined with the volume’s opulent illustrations, appears to be “unsuitable for children,” a phrase that almost always connotes a judgment of immorality. For Wilde’s reply, see Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,*” in *Selected Letters*, 99.


philosophy, and he often alludes to the dominant thinkers of nineteenth-century metaphysics in his essays; significantly, the context for these allusions almost always involves his subversive stance on absolutism or universalism in relation to ethics or moral truth. For Wilde, the individual artist determines truth in what he creates, but he determines its obverse counterpart simultaneously, resulting in a system of moral and even ontological relativism: “For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.”

Thus, in Wilde’s fiction, and particularly in the fairy tales, one finds substantial evidence of such thematic relativism, where the richly symbolic stories tantalize the reader with both expected and unexpected notions of morality and meaning, and each tale possesses “many secrets, many answers.” However, if there is a principle or characteristic that lends coherence to the tales, I believe it exists in their wholesale dismissal of conventional morality and other such institutions of social authority as a means to progress as the development of the individual.

Wilde’s short fiction—and his only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)—deal most directly with the conflict between morality and individual desire. Critics have historically linked this conflict with the philosophical dilemma examined in Tennyson’s The Palace of Art (1832), in which poem the speaker ensconces his soul in a palace filled with beautiful objets d’art, only to watch her grow restless over the movement she perceives outside her walls and of previous social configurations, a willful ignorance and complacency he likens to a “mental illness”: “And even then it takes long enough for this [herd] instinct to become sufficiently dominant for the valuation of moral values to become enmeshed and embedded in the antithesis (as is the case in contemporary Europe, for example: the prejudice which takes ‘moral’, ‘unegoistic,’ and ‘désintéressé’ as equivalent terms already rules with the power of a ‘fixed idea’ and mental illness’.”


See note 11 above.
leave to “purg[e] [her] guilt.” Whereas the usual implications of this common critical comparison between Tennyson and Wilde remain wrongheaded to my mind, relying as they do on an overly analogical reading of the poem as an intellectual’s anxiety over privation and other social inequalities, the comparison does retain some validity in that, like Wilde’s characters, Tennyson’s poetic soul cannot resist the power of social influence, but capitulates to its demands by vowing to live a life of ascetic solitude in “a cottage in the vale.”

Ironically, the soul merely exchanges one form of solipsism for another, moving no nearer the “hollow orb of moving Circumstance” than when she was inside the palace.

Similarly, in Wilde’s stories, the demands and prohibitions of the social code of ethics forever clash with the main characters’ longings for experience, for the appreciation of beauty, or for the fostering of love. Like Tennyson’s “soul,” they abandon beauty for moral penitence, only to die or remain isolated from those with whom they sought to form communal bonds.

Eventually, for instance, Dorian wishes to cease the corruption of his soul without losing any of the beauty of his physical life; he longs for love with Sibyl Vane, but he also longs for her artistic ability, and when he realizes that he cannot have both, he destroys the thing he loves to live a life in the pursuit of transient pleasures. However, as a living work of art, Dorian Gray—whose

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17 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Palace of Art,” in Tennyson’s Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1999), 55-63, ln. 296. See also Isobel Murray, introduction to Complete Shorter Fiction by Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1-18, 9. As have innumerable subsequent critics of Wilde’s work, Murray draws a thematic comparison between Tennyson’s poem The Palace of Art and Wilde’s fairy tales, suggesting that they are little more than allegories for social reform or illustrations of the inequalities between Victorian social classes: “Wilde himself wrote to a friend that these stories [The Happy Prince and Other Tales] were ‘an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality—to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative’. For once, he seems fairly accurate to describe his own work: the gently Christian-Socialist tone of ‘The Happy Prince’—and of ‘The Young King’, written shortly after, and the quasi-biblical language do combine the fairy-tale mode with the shattering problems of Victorian poverty, privilege, and art, as Tennyson had most schematically outlined these in The Palace of Art.”

18 Tennyson, “Palace of Art,” ln. 291.

19 Ibid., ln. 255.

very name denotes his place on the painter’s palette—makes the fatal mistake of striving for both
coral and artistic perfection, only to discover that one must corrupt as the other refines. As
Christopher Nassaar writes, Dorian epitomizes the decadent artist in his decision to abandon the
restrictions of good and evil in his quest for ever-varied experiences and modes of beauty: “The
main difference between a morally committed aesthete and a decadent is that the latter, looking
within and discovering not only purity but evil and corruption, yields to the corrupt impulse and
tries to find joy and beauty in evil.”

For Wilde, it is only through courageous experimentation
with “good” and “evil” that the true artist can emerge and forge his own morality. In fact, what
society would deem an individual’s sinful act is in reality a felix culpa, an indispensable means
to true progress, as the Miltonic Gilbert asserts in “The Critic as Artist”: “What is termed Sin is
an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become
colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified
assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current
notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics.”

Progress, then, can only be made via
an individual’s active subversion and reconfiguration of social ideologies and hegemonies, and
as Wilde is quick to point out, this process of reconfiguration has always been the engine of
history and can never cease: “Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is
man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through
disobedience and through rebellion” (SOMUS 1081).

melt down a monument to “the dead thing he had most loved”—an image that represents “The Sorrow that endureth
for Ever”—in order to refashion its bronze into “an image of The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment.” In other
words, the artist chooses to construct impermanent beauty out of penitence, suffering, and sorrow.

Christopher Nassaar, “The Darkening Lens,” in Modern Critical Views: Oscar Wilde, ed. Harold Bloom (New
York: Chelsea House, 1985), 107-131, 107. Nassaar prefaces his comment with an affirmation of Dorian’s status as
“a perfect example of the decadent”: “Dorian, as he degenerates, becomes a perfect example of the decadent, and his
picture, as it grows more and more evil, a perfect type of decadent art.”

Wilde, “Critic as Artist,” 1023.
Hence, Wilde’s fairy tales operate as ironic vignettes depicting the errors of individual susceptibility to institutional morality. They dismiss the quest for moral and artistic perfection as impossible, demonstrating instead how an adherence to moral codes results in death or intellectual impotence, and how remaining focused on the development of one’s personality is the only path to progress. Often, the characters that experience a form of moral epiphany are rewarded in the afterlife, but Wilde remains cynical about their influence on those left behind. Society does not change in Wilde’s fairy tale worlds; due to the complicity of most of his characters, no significant personality emerges to challenge the established moral system. Therefore, the tales are essentially negative examples, covertly endorsing Wilde’s doctrine of Individualism by depicting the result of its absence. The pitiful Dwarf in “The Birthday of the Infanta” ignores his developing self-image and accepts the loathsome image offered by the Infanta’s mirror, thereby losing his place as the Infanta’s favorite performing artist and dying like the victim in a coarse melodrama. The eponymous monarch in “The Young King” experiences a series of sermonic dreams that persuade him to adopt an ascetic approach to kingship by seeking to emulate Christ and denounce his riches, but he only succeeds in isolating himself from his incredulous subjects. The unfortunate bird in “The Nightingale and the Rose” performs an act of pure self-sacrifice in the name of love, only to have her death rendered futile by the callous student and his intended love and her beautiful creation crushed beneath a cartwheel. The list of examples goes on and on. Whereas the bulk of criticism written on these tales continues to interpret them utilizing the same moral rubric that Wilde sought to subvert by writing them, I maintain that they illustrate the detriments and limitations of customary morality on the intellectual and legitimate spiritual development of the individual.23

“I told him a story with a moral”: Moral Hegemony in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*

Published for the first time in May of 1888, the stories of Wilde’s *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* appear on first glance to be nothing more than an homage collection in the popular tradition of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. Certainly, as many readers have noted, there exist a number of structural and thematic similarities between Wilde’s first volume of tales and those of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-57) and *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn* (1837), the two monoliths of nineteenth-century European fairy tale literature. Wilde’s tales seem particularly indebted to Andersen’s stories, saturated as they are with anthropomorphized animals and animated objects. Indeed, Jack Zipes reads a number of Wilde’s fairy tales as either direct or tangential “reversal[s]” of Andersen’s iconic stories, and he argues that this obversion or satirization implies Wilde’s attack on superficial, systematized Christianity: “He clearly wanted to subvert the messages conveyed by Andersen’s tales, but more important his poetic style recalled the rhythms and language of the Bible in order to counter the stringent Christian code.”

Although the tales in Wilde’s first collection do not delve into the darker, more complex subjects of *A House of Pomegranates*, they nevertheless exhibit an attempt to gently lampoon the sentimental Christianity of their Dutch forbears, and they resist any serious effort to read them as ingenuous Christian tracts. Rather, the seemingly straightforward stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* utilize the form of the conventional didactic fairy tale to provide an ironic commentary on the hermeneutical limitations of codified morality. As such, the tales highlight the ignorance of both their own naively scrupulous characters as well as the reader who gleans nothing more than Sunday-school doctrine from them.

pronounces Wilde the inheritor of the Victorian Christian evangelical tradition in fairy tale literature begun by George MacDonald and Christina Rossetti: “How the lapsed could find salvation—by changing their mind or that of God, by meritorious works, or by grace, faith, love, friendship, prayer, suffering, or art—became for Rossetti, MacDonald, and Wilde an intense inner question that inspired their fantasy.”

The simplest way to read these stories would be as trite lessons in altruism, charity, and the like, but this reading falls rather wide of Wilde’s mark. As Jerusha McCormack notes, to read the tales as children’s homilies would be to miss the “fracture between plot and discourse, in which action is suspended indefinitely for a kind of logorrhea, to the extent that the only interest of the tale is an engagement of language with itself as a kind of pure verbal decoration.”25 In Wilde’s tales, the plots and the actions of the characters are almost completely incidental to the discourse; his goal is to probe and provoke thought rather than reaffirm moral and ideological presuppositions. As evidenced in his essays, Wilde wrote like a Platonist, in digressive, anecdotal dialogues, and this style extends to his fairy tales.26 In “The Happy Prince,” for example, Wilde focuses his narrative on the interchange between the prince’s statue and the swallow, in which the prince’s image issues his philanthropic commands in programmatic tones while the swallow endeavors to share the beauty of Egypt with his cold metal companion. The accounts of the swallow’s acts of charity occupy much less space in the tale than his panegyrics to the Nile and Egypt’s many other wonders. When the swallow acts on the prince’s authority, the discourse ceases and charitable action begins, but the recipients of the statue’s munificence seem to misconstrue its purpose or underestimate its value. Of course, this disparagement of action is certainly not unique to the fairy tales; Wilde’s disputant Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” relegates action to the lowest level of sentient life, commenting that “[action] is a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious. . . . Its basis is the lack of imagination. It is the last resource of those who know not how to

26 See Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 1023. Through Gilbert, Wilde allots the primacy of place in philosophy to “language, which is the parent, and not the child, of thought.”
Similarly, Wilde describes his utopian socialist paradise as a place where “cultivated leisure” replaces “labour” as the true “aim of man” (SOMUS 1089). As such, one must not take any act of charity in Wilde’s work at face value; his characters may perform good deeds, not for the purposes of reader emulation or moral edification, but as a foil for their discourse on aesthetics and ethics.

In what perhaps remains Wilde’s best known story, “The Happy Prince,” the dichotomies of action / inaction, individual / society, and beauty / repulsiveness take center stage, and the dynamics between these elements present a very different argument than that ascribed to the tale by traditional critical examination. For one thing, it is the swallow, not the prince, who functions as the Wildean tragic hero of the story: his aesthetic heroism stems from his reluctance to desecrate the prince’s statue and his continued descriptions of the beauties of Egypt, even amidst the bitter cold of the city. The prince, on the other hand, begins and ends the story as a sort of possessed artistic object (a favorite device of Wilde’s), one which degenerates into literal debris as the story progresses. The prince’s image, once an inspiring work of art at the heart of the city, falls into ruin through its own insistent acts of random philanthropy, acts that accomplish little in rectifying the social problems which led to its beneficiaries’ miserable conditions. Thus, the story presents us with an object study for the ideas in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”: the deterioration of a beautiful and appreciated work of art—along with the death of an innocent swallow—brought about through the implementation of ineffectual

27 Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 1023.
28 See, for example, Philip K. Cohen, “Dynamics of Faith and Genre: The Fairy Tales,” in The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde (London: Associated University Presses, 1978), 73-104, 81-2: “‘The Young King’ and ‘The Happy Prince’ introduce another moral dilemma and source of personal guilt; in each, the protagonist’s awareness of human suffering conflicts with his desire for a life of beauty and pleasure. Characters caught in this conflict can, like the king and prince, earn salvation by converting from the pursuit of pleasure to the imitation of Christ.”
altruism, in return for no discernible social advance, either on moral or economic grounds.\textsuperscript{29} As both art and nature fail to remedy the social ills of the city, “The Happy Prince” demonstrates what Wilde saw as the flawed reasoning of nineteenth-century charity, a misunderstanding of Christ’s real message, which, as he writes in “Soul of Man,” involves an uncompromising endorsement of Individualism: “What Jesus meant was this. He said to man, ‘You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself.’ . . . And so he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself. . . . It does not matter what he is, as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him. All imitation in morals and in life is wrong” (1085-7). By mistakenly destroying himself in imitative morality, the prince robs his people of his inspiring presence and denies them the hope of happiness represented by his beautiful image. In enlisting the swallow as his emissary, he also prevents a loved one from being happy and ultimately contributes to his death. Only when he realizes the truth of what he has done to himself and his friend does his leaden “heart” break, granting him access to God’s inner circle, not for his charitable acts, but for his spiritual enlightenment.

From the beginning of “The Happy Prince,” Wilde plays with the role of art and art criticism in a superficial society, but he nevertheless makes clear that the prince’s statue is a source of legitimate inspiration, hope, and joy for the citizens of the city.\textsuperscript{30} Speaking of the story in a letter to his friend Leonard Smithers, Wilde outlines his aesthetic purpose in writing it, a

\textsuperscript{29} See Guy Willoughby, “Jesus as a Model for Selfhood in The Happy Prince and Other Tales,” in Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde (London: Associated University Presses, 1993), 19-33, 26. Although he goes on to affirm the prince’s and the swallow’s beatific “perfection” through “sacrifice” and “altruism,” Willoughby acknowledges the uselessness of the two friends’ acts of charity in legitimately improving the lives of their charges or in altering the social situation of the city: “The true significance of [the Happy Prince’s] selflessness is not only unperceived by his various beneficiaries . . . but, in concrete terms, is quite futile. Even though ‘the children’s faces grow rosier’ as a result of the Swallow’s piecemeal distribution of the statue’s gold leaf, we know that the oppressive conditions that perpetrate the wretched poverty of their lives will continue.”

\textsuperscript{30} See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1084. At the start of his tale, the prince is already realizing the potential of his personality simply by being beautiful: “And yet while [the true personality of man] will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is.”
purpose which clothes the tale in an ideal form, uncorrupted by “the purely imitative character of modern art.”\(^{31}\) Hence, when the tale begins, the prince’s statue stands “high above the city, on a tall column,” perched atop an actual pedestal for the elevation of art and beauty over squalor, degradation, and petty polemics.\(^{32}\) The people of the city look on the statue with admiration, comparing their own mundane lives with its beauty and seeming contentedness: one of the Town Councillors makes an attempt at amateurish art criticism by comparing the statue’s beauty to that of a “weathercock,” and a mother rebukes her fussy child by stating that “‘the Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything’” (95). Perhaps most pointedly, Wilde’s narrator reveals the statue as a source of religious inspiration for the “Charity Children” of the city church, who claim that the prince’s image “looks just like an angel,” corresponding to (and perhaps fostering) the visions of angels they have seen in their “dreams” (95). The prince’s statue thus initially functions as Wilde insists all art must function, if it is to be “healthy” (\textit{SOMUS} 1093): as a source of intellectual and spiritual stimulation, art should “creat[e] in the public both taste and temperament” rather than “try to be popular” (\textit{SOMUS} 1096, 1090). In other words, instead of coming down off of its pedestal piece by piece, the prince’s statue should motivate people to develop their personalities from its proper place above them: “Now Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic” (\textit{SOMUS} 1090).

\footnote{\textsuperscript{31} Oscar Wilde, “To Leonard Smithers,” in \textit{The Letters of Oscar Wilde}, 221. See also Wilde, “To Amelie Rives Chanler,” in \textit{Letters}, 237. Echoing the phrasing in his letter to Smithers, Wilde prefigures one of his most definitive statements on the fairy tales as a body of work in a short note to his American friend Rives Chanler. He describes the tales as reflective of “modern life,” but in “a form remote from reality,” that is “in a mode that is ideal and not imitative.” Thus the prince, in his pristine state, could stand for the “ideal” of Wilde’s tale before it becomes broken apart piecemeal by the “imitative” morality of its social conscience. Wilde has effectively written the problem of moral hegemony into the story itself: an overly material view of beauty, augmented by conditioned morals, inevitably results in the destruction of the work of art. In other words, our conventional reading of the story ultimately destroys it.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{32} Oscar Wilde, “The Happy Prince and Other Tales,” in \textit{Complete Shorter Fiction}, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 95-137, 95. All subsequent citations of the fairy tales in this collection will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically.}
However, the prince mistakes his elevated position for one of moral perspective, and like an aesthetic Jacob Marley, he weeps over his inability to aid or succor those he sees suffering in the city. His moral monomania is so intense that he cannot look beyond his immediate circumstances to enjoy the beauty of the swallow’s ekphrasis of Egypt, nor can he imagine the actual ramifications of his philanthropic acts. With maudlin affectation, he tells the swallow that “the suffering of men and women” is “more marvelous than anything,” that “there is no Mystery so great as Misery” (101). According to Jerome Griswold, this moment marks the swallow’s recognition of “mercy[’s]” superiority to mere “sacrifice,” when he realizes that his dream of “compensation” among the splendors of Egypt for his acts of charity is no longer as important as the pure altruism he will experience as the prince’s messenger of mercy in the city.\(^{33}\) However, despite its theological complexity, Griswold’s argument hardly seems supported by the text. According to the story, the swallow stays because the prince has rendered himself blind through his rash acts of ineffectual benefaction—two of the gemstones he gives away are his eyes. Because of his great love for the prince, the heroic bird remains in the city to provide his friend with one last opportunity to move beyond his now literally blind moralism into the more imaginative realm of beauty and art:

“You are blind now,” [the Swallow] said, “so I will stay with you always.” . . . All the next day he sat on the Prince’s shoulder, and told him stories of what he had seen in strange lands. He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch gold fish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything . . . and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies. (101)

The swallow’s surrogate vision teems with all the wonders of art, the rich detail of color and texture, the exoticism and intrigue of mystic wisdom, the fantastic narratives of unlikely creatures. Nevertheless, the metal prince responds with his exaltation of “Misery,” commanding the swallow to fly over his city and describe the squalor, whereupon he allocates the last shreds of his former beauty to the poor for some meager bread. Like the one “who know[s] not how to dream,” the prince consistently resorts to mere action, sending the swallow to deliver his precious gems and gold leaf into the hands of those who do not fully appreciate them, nor derive any lasting benefit from them. Additionally, as the poor seamstress, the struggling playwright, the match-girl, and the hungry street urchins consume the prince’s value, his friend and messenger begins to die from the cold and a lack of food, while he devolves into what the Town Councillors describe as “‘little better than a beggar’” (103).

In addition to the prince’s gradual blindness and lack of influence for good for himself or others, the small detail that precludes “The Happy Prince” from fitting neatly into its popular critical category of the moral tale occurs in the instance of the prince’s second “death,” when his leaden heart breaks inside him. After living his life of beauty and pleasure in the aptly named castle of “Sans-Souci,” the prince’s second life resembles that of Tennyson’s poetic soul from the conclusion to The Palace of Art: he spends his time endeavoring to purge his guilt over having experienced joy amidst such ugliness and misery as exists in his city. It is appropriate that this second life is stationary, for those who subsume their personalities to the demands of

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34 See note 27 above. See also Rodney Shewan, “The Happy Prince and Other Tales,” in Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), 40-51, 41. Shewan notes the apparent futility of the prince’s self-destructive philanthropy due to the incomprehension of those to whom it is directed: “Yet, in spite of the idealized ending, the beauty of the acts of self-sacrifice seems marred by the obtuseness of their objects.”

35 See, among many other such instances, Edouard Roditi, “The Poems in Prose,” in Modern Critical Views: Oscar Wilde, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 21-34, 29. Roditi glibly assigns the whole of Wilde’s first fairy tale collection to the largely innocuous category of virtuous didacticism: “To the Papas and Mamas of the upper-class nurseries of the late Victorian era, such moral tales as The Happy Prince, The Selfish Giant, The Devoted Friend, The Nightingale and the Rose or The Remarkable Rocket, with their elaborate pathos, sly satire and coy humor, were charming and amusing. . . .”
morality are cut off from animate existence, frozen in place by their “authority” and prevented from exercising their true vocation, which is “to live, to listen, and to love” (SOMUS 1099). Hence, his charitable actions bring him no closer to his people; instead, they rob him of the beauty that made him noticeable and render him virtually invisible. On the other hand, by devoting himself to the beauty of life and bravely confronting the mystery of death, the swallow teaches the prince both the value of friendship and the importance of maintaining an open mind and a love of new experiences. Tragically, the prince’s awakening occurs concurrently with his friend’s death: he finally admits to his love of the swallow, only as the bird freezes at his feet. For most of the tale, the prince has been so focused on alleviating his guilt that he has forgotten to live his own life, to witness the beautiful friendship growing between himself and the swallow, until it is too late. Significantly, Wilde inserts a textual jibe into his narrative, precisely at the point where the prince, with dramatic sentimentality, first discusses his “heart.” The jest involves a play on the clichéd idea of “a heart of gold” signifying moral purity or innocence: when the prince reveals that his heart is actually “made of lead,” the swallow quips to himself, “What, is he not solid gold?” (97). Far from indicating any egotistical or materialistic tendencies in the bird’s character, this brief aside implies the swallow’s (and the writer’s) criticism of the prince’s literally superficial morality. The prince’s compassion goes no deeper than the surface of his lead statue; it does not yet penetrate into his very core and alter who he is on the inside. However, when the swallow finally dies—leaving his companion with a

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36 It is important to note the structural obversion here between the roles of the prince and the swallow. In a traditional homiletic tale, the person in moral authority—a guide, priest, guru, king, or in this case, prince—would typically effect an internal change in his disciple, but Wilde ends his tale with the swallow breaking the heart of the prince, which throws all of his moral teaching into question and repositions the swallow as the story’s wise teacher, but of love and beauty rather than misery and suffering. For the standard reading of the tale—which follows the dominant moral pattern precisely and ignores the anomalous reversal at the end—see Robert K. Martin, “Oscar Wilde and the Fairy Tale: ‘The Happy Prince’ as Self-Dramatization,” Studies in Short Fiction 16, no. 1 (1979): 74-7, 74: “The Prince’s transformation has already occurred; it remains but for him to realize that transformation by carrying out the acts of self-sacrifice which form the basis of the tale. The swallow is not yet transformed, however, and it is the Prince who will lead the swallow along the path to spiritual regeneration through love.”
philosophical question about the nature of death rather than a trite moral platitude about self-sacrifice—the prince understands real beauty because he finally understands love. Therefore, God deems the dead swallow and the prince’s broken heart “the two most precious things in the city,” not because of their collaborative charity, but because of their love for one another (103).

As the “The Happy Prince” designates an especially unhappy individual who denies his princehood and loses his identity in a misguided attempt at charity, so “The Devoted Friend” tells of two men who fail to understand the nature of true friendship, due primarily to their overly literal adherence to conventional morality. Additionally, whereas in “The Happy Prince” the hegemonic presence of the mentor / mentee relationship (along with the repetitive language of the prince’s commands) invites a standard moral hermeneutic, the whole of “The Devoted Friend” stands within an Æsopian narrative frame, in which the moral pedagogue is a linnet attempting to educate a water-rat by means of the story. Thus, the story of little Hans and Hugh the Miller begins and ends with an application of its supposed “moral” to the affairs of some aquatic animals. Wilde thus constructs a volksmärchen (folktale), modeled after a number of Andersen’s and the Grimms’ tales, and surrounds it with an animal fable featuring a pompous bird and his predictable moral. His point in so arranging his tale is to illustrate the limitations of heavy-handed moralism on the development of a narrative, even while he makes a similar point within the story of little Hans and Hugh the Miller, whose friendship suffers from hypocrisy on Hugh’s part and from imitative morality, a lack of originality and disobedience, on little Hans’s part.

37 See Richard Ellman, “Ingenious Fictions,” in Oscar Wilde, 295-300, 299: “Wilde presents the stories [in Happy Prince and House of Pomegranates] like sacraments of a lost faith. Most of the characters are brought to recognition of themselves, and a recognition of ugliness and misery. Wilde celebrates the power of love as greater than the power of evil or the power of good.”

38 See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1081, and the epigraph above. Little Hans, as the perpetual personality vacuum, embodies the sort of humble acquiescence to established etiquette, social mores, and basic morality that inhibits
The frame narrative of “The Devoted Friend” commences with an extreme act of compulsory socialization, forecasting the forceful didacticism of the linnet’s story and indicating Wilde’s critical subtext. A mother duck directs her children to “stand on [their] heads,” threatening them with social ostracism if they fail to master her technique. The ducklings, however, pay her no heed, being “so young that they did not know what an advantage it is to be in society at all” (115). After the palpable cynicism of this passage, the tale’s source of moral authority appears in the form of a green linnet, who interrupts the conversation between the water-rat and the duck with a question about “duty,” one of Wilde’s least favorite words. The linnet asks for the water-rat’s “idea of the duties of a devoted friend,” and the rat responds with a seemingly egotistical definition of devoted friendship: “‘What a silly question!’ cried the Water-rat. ‘I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course’” (115). Actually, the rat’s definition comes closer to articulating pure friendship in Wilde’s estimation—a relationship founded on legitimate fidelity rather than on the incidental acts, or “duties,” of devotion. The linnet’s essentially materialistic view of friendship reduces it to the level of a systemized exchange of goods and services. Ironically, this reified conceptualization of friendship dominates the story of little Hans and the Miller, as the latter sees his relationship with Hans as little more than an opportunity to procure various favors and gifts from an unwary man. On the other hand, as repellent as the Miller’s actions in the story may be, his personality remains the most fascinating one to read, which suggests that little Hans’s error lies in his lack of personality—in

Individualism. If “it is through disobedience that progress has been made,” then Little Hans is perhaps the most anti-progressive character in all of the fairy tales.

his willingness to subsume his thoughts and feelings in those of his fair-weather friend the Miller.\textsuperscript{40}

Inside his nested narrative, Wilde reveals the two men’s erroneous understanding of friendship almost immediately. As the linnet dictates the story, he presents Hugh the Miller as one who demonstrates his devotion through the greedy arrogation of little Hans’s possessions: “Indeed, so devoted was the rich Miller to little Hans, that he would never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking a large nosegay, or a handful of sweet herbs, or filling his pockets with plums and cherries if it was the fruit season” (116). The ostensibly virtuous Hans, whose most distinguishing characteristic is his dearth of distinguishing characteristics, treats his friendship with Hugh more like a discipleship, reveling in the rich Miller’s hypocritical “ideas” at the expense of his own better judgment and self-respect: “‘Real friends have everything in common,’ the Miller used to say, and little Hans nodded and smiled, and felt very proud of having a friend with such noble ideas” (116). Hans “never troubled his head” about the Miller’s obvious hypocrisy; like an intellectual nullity, he simply listens to “the wonderful things the Miller used to say about the unselfishness of true friendship.” Arguably, Wilde uses the dynamic between the two friends as an analogue for the linnet and the water-rat, who are in turn clever stand-ins for the author of the tale and its reader, respectively; hence, the real message of “The Devoted Friend” concerns the proper response to authoritative literature of the sort that informs the classical fairy tale tradition, which should correspond to the water-rat’s incensed and dismissive “‘Pooh!’” at the story’s end (125).\textsuperscript{41} Far from condoning self-

\textsuperscript{40} See Sarah Marsh, “Twice Upon a Time,” 77-9. Although Marsh’s article argues for a standard moral reading of “The Devoted Friend,” relying on such misguided observations as “the Water-rat’s lack of proper moral feeling,” she nevertheless affirms little Hans’s complicity in his own death by immolation: “Wilde, however, purposefully rejects happiness ever after in order to warn his readers of the dangers of Hans’s deference and relinquishment of his belongings to Hugh.”

\textsuperscript{41} See Jody Price, “Framework for a Transgressive Theory,” 53. Although Price’s argument posits a preeminently political motive for Wilde’s fiction, drama, and critical prose, her description of the disruptive quality of his fairy
destruction through a misguided Christian notion of “living for others,” the story of little Hans, who dies as a direct result of his unquestioning vacuity, teaches us the importance of resisting the dominance of others in the development of our thoughts and beliefs.\footnote{See Oscar Wilde, “De Profundis,” in \textit{The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde} (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 873-957, 926. Even in prison, during the most intense soul-searching and self-criticism of his life, Wilde refused to compromise or mitigate his ideas about the primacy of Individualism, and he denounces those who would attempt to use Christ’s message to endorse their shallow moralism: “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation. Christ was not merely the supreme Individualist, but he was the first in History. People have tried to make him out an ordinary Philanthropist, like the dreadful philanthropists of the nineteenth century, or ranked him as an Altruist with the unscientific and sentimental. But he was really neither one nor the other. . . . To live for others as a definite self-conscious aim was not his creed. It was not the basis of his creed.” See also Oscar Wilde, “To Georgina Weldon,” in \textit{Letters}, 750-1. After his release from prison and emigration to Paris, Wilde corresponded with a number of his old acquaintances in an effort to resume friendships shattered by his trial and conviction. In one such letter, he reminds his friend Ms. Weldon of his unaltered philosophy of Individualism: “For myself, of course, the aim of life is to realise one’s own personality—one’s own nature, and now, as before, it is through Art that I realise what is in me.”} 

Despite his clever epigrams and “beautiful sentiments,” the Miller epitomizes many things Wilde found distasteful about the moral hypocrisy of nineteenth-century society.\footnote{See Richard Ellman, “Wilde as Criminologist,” 329: “He asked [Victorian society] to tolerate aberrations from the norm, such as homosexuality, to give up its hypocrisy both by recognizing social facts and by acknowledging that its principles were based upon hatred rather than love, leading to privation of personality as of art.”} His systematic extortion of little Hans hinges on his promise to give the poor gardener his old, broken-down wheelbarrow, from which act of unconsummated generosity he derives a wealth of guilt-induced goods and services. However, the Miller does at times seem to echo Wilde’s sentiments about the ineffectiveness of material charity, as he reproaches his altruistic son for suggesting they offer little Hans food and shelter during the long winter: “‘Why, if little Hans came up here, and saw our warm fire, and our good supper, and our great cask of red wine, he might get envious, and envy is a most terrible thing, and would spoil anybody’s nature. I am his best friend, and I will always watch over him, and see that he is not led into any temptations’” (117). Here, Hugh the Miller expounds on the criminal motivations of envy—or “jealousy,” as

\textit{tales accurately conveys their tendency to force readers to reevaluate ideologies and epistemologies: “However, Wilde’s interest would not be simply to reinforce accepted behavior, but the struggle would be for a new, more just vision of existence. . . . Within his jumbled world of images which are familiar, yet confusing, to readers, and words which they recognize, but are puzzling in their ‘new’ meaning, readers can begin to understand the ‘real’ world and its determined project of exclusion and maintenance of power.”}

42
Wilde terms it in “Soul of Man”—suggesting that exposure to the inequalities inherent in the social class system might corrupt little Hans’s better nature, as philanthropic interactions between the upper and lower orders often did in Victorian culture. Wilde characterizes these high-minded gestures as harmful interference, arguing that they are “bound up” in an unhealthy preoccupation with private property, and intimating that the best thing is to avoid them until the abolition of private property makes them no longer necessary:

But though a crime may not be against property, it may spring from the misery and rage and depression produced by our wrong system of property-holding, and so, when that system is abolished, will disappear. . . . Jealousy, which is an extraordinary source of crime in modern life, is an emotion closely bound up with our conceptions of property, and under Socialism and Individualism will die out. (SOMUS 1088)

Thus, what sounds like the Miller’s callous casuistry actually springs from Wilde’s political thought, though admittedly in an inchoate form; after all, Wilde would not put his ideas on socialism on paper until seven years after the publication of “The Devoted Friend.” Nevertheless, Hugh’s insistence on keeping his friendship with little Hans above the tawdry level of mere charity does anticipate some of Wilde’s later ideas on social justice: in fact, the Miller pointedly states that he would never give Hans a handout—“some flour on credit”—because to do so would sully the nature of their relationship: “‘Flour is one thing, and friendship is another, and they should not be confused’” (117).

Far from spoiling Hans’s nature through charity, the Miller overwhelms his simple-minded friend, replacing the simple man’s interests, vocation, and ideas with his own, and it is little Hans’s meagerness of character that Wilde derides most directly in his tale. Due to the hard winter, Hans has been forced to sell several of his possessions for sustenance, including some
items of personal distinction: his silver buttons, silver chain, and pipe. Symbolically, these simple bric-a-brac comprise Hans’s modest sense of self-worth, as we learn that “he was very anxious to get his silver buttons back” with the profit from selling his flowers (120). However, when the manipulative Miller requests the whole of Hans’s flower crop in return for the promise of his derelict wheelbarrow, Hans succumbs to the weight of guilt and relinquishes all he has, essentially admitting that he would prefer a total lack of personal distinction to the “good opinion” of the Miller: “‘My dear friend, my best friend,’ cried little Hans, ‘you are welcome to all the flowers in my garden. I would much sooner have your good opinion than my silver buttons, any day’” (120).

Indeed, many of Hans’s supposedly selfless actions stem from guilt over the Miller’s spurious generosity, and his goal to emulate the Miller’s “beautiful ideas” replaces the development of his own personality and results in his lonely death on the moors. Wilde emphasizes little Hans’s devotion to imitative morality immediately prior to his final errand on behalf of the Miller: “So little Hans worked away for the Miller, and the Miller said all kinds of beautiful things about friendship, which Hans took down in a note-book, and used to read over at night, for he was a very good scholar” (123). Following this passage—in which one can hardly miss the derision of the author who wrote elsewhere that “most people are other people,” whose “thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation”—little Hans agrees to fetch the doctor for the Miller’s son without a lantern during a storm. Fittingly, he stumbles into a hole in the water-logged moor and drowns. His literal blindness recalls his lack of original intelligence, and his death by immolation signifies his loss of identity in acquiescence to the Miller’s moral hegemony. Wilde subtly connects the death of little Hans with the frame narrative’s final commentary on didactic literature: he describes both the

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44 See note 42 above.
treacherous moor and “a tale with a moral” as “very dangerous,” implying that wandering fecklessly around through either could lead one to a bad end.\textsuperscript{45}

In addition to the elements of Wilde’s dissident subtext that pervade the internal story, Wilde uses his frame narrative to further demonstrate the stunting limitations of hegemonic morality on the development of new ideas. By way of subverting the moral direction of the tale early on, Wilde allows the allegedly villainous water-rat to interrupt the linnet immediately following the Miller’s treatise on the dangers of charity. He asks, with an inescapable irony, “‘Is that the end of the story?’,” which draws the reader’s attention both to the unconventional sentiments of the Miller and to the predictably didactic structure of the tale, which will undoubtedly go on to illustrate the dangers of such seditious ideas. When the linnet informs him that he has heard only the tale’s beginning, the water-rat responds with a diatribe of literary criticism: he tells the linnet of “the new method” of story-telling, which inverts chronological order and ends in ambiguity “with the middle” (118). Cleverly, Wilde’s water-rat also expresses his stubborn admiration for the Miller in a deliberate misreading of the tale’s didactic telos. The opinionated rodent admits that he “like[s] the Miller immensely,” due to the character’s “lovely sentiments” (118). Unlike little Hans, however, the water-rat does not wish to adopt the Miller’s “sentiments” as his own, nor does he seem to imply that he would ever put them into practice.\textsuperscript{46}

Instead, his admiration draws on the “great sympathy” that exists between two ideological

\textsuperscript{45} See Sarah Marsh, “Twice Upon a Time,” 79. Marsh also notes the repetition of the phrase “very dangerous” near the end of Wilde’s story, but she interprets this juxtaposition rather confusingly as another indictment of the water-rat, whose inability to comprehend the tale’s moral makes the telling of moral tales to “a callous audience” dangerous: “According to Wilde, therefore, it is ‘very dangerous’ both to traverse the dark moor on an errand for an exploitative ‘friend’ and to tell a truly moral story to a callous audience like the Water-rat, who cannot recognize the moral articulated in ‘The Devoted Friend’ through its intricate deviations from Grimm and Andersen fairy tale traditions.”

\textsuperscript{46} See Wilde, “Devoted Friend,” 117-8. Just as action receives a lower place than deliberative thought and discourse in “The Happy Prince,” Hugh the Miller has some critical things to say about it in “The Devoted Friend.” In accordance with Wilde’s philosophical writings, Hugh’s comments position the one who invents or expounds ethical statutes perennially above the one who merely puts them into practice: “‘Lots of people act well,’ answered the Miller; ‘but very few people talk well, which shows that talking is much the more difficult thing of the two, and much the finer thing also.’”
iconoclasts, two true individualists: “‘I have all kinds of beautiful sentiments myself, so there is a great sympathy between us’” (118). Similarly, the water-rat’s incensed reaction upon learning he had been told “a tale with a moral” indicates the strength of his personality, rather than his “lack of proper moral feeling.” He rightly rebukes the dogmatic linnet for seeking to impose his ideas on another, exclaiming that he would never have agreed to listen to such a deliberate allegory had he known what it was beforehand: “‘I think you should have told me that before you began. If you had done so, I certainly would not have listened to you; in fact, I should have said ‘Pooh,’ like the critic’” (125). Repeatedly, the water-rat bravely exercises his critical faculty, which Wilde considers of utmost importance in the progress toward Individualism, as it reveals a healthy, burgeoning personality: “... it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation, the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, the more true.” Thus the real “egotist” in this scenario is the linnet, for he “makes claims upon others” by telling tales of moral conformity, whereas the water-rat most closely typifies Wilde’s blossoming “Individualist.”

To a lesser degree, the other tales in *The Happy Prince* contribute to Wilde’s programmatic reevaluation of established moral tenets, though none of them implies a lack of personality as inherently worse than poor morals more perspicaciously than “The Happy Prince” and “The Devoted Friend.” “The Nightingale and the Rose,” for example, illustrates the futility of an artistic appeal to a narrowly practical personality, one devoid of true imagination and thus incapable of higher love. The arrogant student judges the nightingale unfairly from an

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48 Wilde, “Critic as Artist,” 1033.
49 See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1101: “For the egotist is he who makes claims upon others, and the Individualist will not desire to do that. It will not give him pleasure.”
unwarranted position of moral authority, ironically censuring her lack of depth and accusing her of selfishness in accordance with social prejudices concerning artists: “‘She has form,’ he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove—‘that cannot be denied to her, but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that all artists are selfish’” (107). The irony here lies in the fact that the student will be proven to be “all style, without any sincerity,” and the bird will indeed “sacrifice herself” through her music: she will give away her “heart’s-blood” to create the red rose outside the student’s window, which he will subsequently throw beneath the wheels of a passing carriage. Through her devotion to her art, the nightingale shows a sort of selflessness combined with individual genius; however, in light of the tale’s cynical conclusion, Wilde seems to suggest that her actual physical sacrifice on the thorn of the rose goes too far, just as the metal prince’s self-destructive altruism results in his “savage mutilation” (SOMUS 1100). The nightingale remains on a lower level of individual development in her preoccupation and sympathy with pain, which, Wilde insists, “is the least fine mode” of sympathy and “apt to become morbid.”

Nevertheless, the clear problem in these tales as Wilde presents it remains the conformation with and implementation of moral authority in lieu of an uninhibited, “natural” ethic that stems from the developing personality of the individual. The prince mistakenly destroys himself—along with his ability to bring joy to his people—through his acts of socially

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50 See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1101-2. Wilde goes on to comment that those who sympathize only or predominantly with pain cannot decrease the amount of pain or mitigate its causes, but those who move beyond pain to sympathize with joy add to the net “sum of joy in the world”: “But it must be remembered that while sympathy with joy intensifies the sum of joy in the world, sympathy with pain does not really diminish the amount of pain. It may make man better able to endure evil, but the evil remains.”

51 Ibid., 1084. Wilde describes the “true personality of man,” which will create its own morality, as an autonomous organism, following only the strictures of its own internal code, like a plant fulfilling the schematic of its DNA: “It will be a marvelous thing—the true personality of man—when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows.”
endorsed philanthropy, demonstrating as he does so the ultimate futility of such temporary measures. The swallow attempts to educate the prince in the joys of beauty, but the prince’s charitable agenda inhibits the bird’s efforts, and he dies an ugly death in an ugly place. Similarly, the Miller’s adherence to a hypocritical moral code allows him to exploit his true friend, but it prevents him from ever achieving the personality he mocks with his lovely “sentiments.” Little Hans, on the other hand, accepts the Miller’s moral platitudes as the gospel of friendship, which leads to the total sublimation of his personality in the ideas of his protean friend. Thus, in these brief fantasies, reflections of “modern life in a form remote from reality,” Wilde offers a sustained indictment of moral hegemony. He punishes the limited imaginations of his characters through disfigurement, isolation, and death. Simultaneously, he points up the restrictive form of the didactic tale, proffering a stylistic critique that corresponds to his critique of content. Typically, his tales’ endings subvert reader expectations in an effort to disrupt the form itself: his noble characters frequently die, sometimes with no discernible reward, while his less scrupulous characters live on and his societies continue unabated and unchanged.

Nineteenth-century didacticism, Wilde implies, resembles nineteenth-century philanthropy: it proceeds from a dubious position of moral authority, oppresses the imagination and individuality of its objects, and produces either no effect at all, or leads to physical or intellectual death. As Lawrence Danson affirms, Wilde’s revolutionary socialism dares to imagine a world without such dominant ideologies as those that limit his fairy tale characters; by showing his readers the limitations inherent in their acquiescence to moral convention and custom, he reveals the utopian alternative, a transcendent socialism that “exists after history’s end, when ideology in no way mediates either individual existence or relationships between individuals.” Due to his intractable stance on Individualism, Wilde “refuses to recognise any shaping force more powerful than the

52 See note 31 above.
individual imagination.” Hence progress, under Wilde’s formulation, means the end of history and society as we know them, or rather the infinite remaking of both from the perspective of the liberated individual personality.

MIRRORS OF WISDOM AND OPINION: MORALITY AS SELF-LOATING IN _A HOUSE OF POMEGRANATES_

Unlike their counterparts in _The Happy Prince and Other Tales_, the stories that make up _A House of Pomegranates_ contain remarkably little humor or lightheartedness. Instead, they are often gruesome accounts of moral reformation or epiphany, including graphic descriptions of disfigurement, disease, and death. The characters that populate these tales learn their lessons the hard way, but the significance of those lessons remains ambiguous. Collected and published in book form in 1891—the same year that saw the publication of Wilde’s essay collection _Intentions_—_A House of Pomegranates_ received mixed reviews. One commentator in the _Athenaeum_ dubbed it “a volume of allegories,” albeit one likely to make a British child “scream, according to his disposition, with terror or amusement,” while another reviewer in the _Saturday Review_ classified the book’s four tales as “all of the _Märchen_ order,” implying that they have more in common with traditional German folktales than with conventional allegory. Wilde’s friend Frank Harris summed up the book’s impact in his famous biography: “it was handled contemptuously in the press and had no sale.” And aside from his response to the review in the _Pall Mall Gazette_ concerning the book’s intended audience, and a vituperative defense of the ornamentation of its cover, Wilde was largely silent about his second collection of fairy tales.

More recent critical analysis of the book has focused on the perceived socialist politics of “The

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55 Frank Harris, _Oscar Wilde_ (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1916), 73.
56 See note 12 above. See also Wilde, “To the Editor of the _Speaker_,” _Letters_, 299-301.
Young King,” or on the similar treatment of the demonic in “The Fisherman and His Soul” and The Picture of Dorian Gray, both of which feature a bifurcated protagonist that longs to live unfettered by conventional notions of morality.  

At least one critic has noted the tonal singularity of the latter collection; Michelle Ruggaber argues that the language and dark subject matter of A House of Pomegranates anticipates a predominantly adult audience, and she affirms that the collection “strives for complexity of plot and confusion of morals,” utilizing “stories of a dark nature with complex plots, which, while they can still be enjoyed by children, are meant to challenge and destabilize the expectations of adults.”

Surprisingly, none of the critical readings of A House of Pomegranates as an intentional collection of tales—two of its stories, “The Birthday of the Infanta” and “The Young King,” were published separately in 1888-9, but they were republished in conjunction with “The Fisherman and His Soul” and “The Star-Child” in the 1891 edition—has addressed the book’s most conspicuous symbolic motif, namely, mirrors and their corresponding moments of self-definition. All four tales feature the explicit use of a mirror or mirrored surface by the protagonist or one of the other major characters, and what is more, each moment of reflection signifies that character’s engagement with codified morality. For example, in “The Young King,” a mysterious “man habited as a pilgrim” commands the troubled monarch to gaze into his mirror and accept the guilt of his morbid dreams, dreams that present the ugliness associated with the manufacture of his beautiful coronation regalia. As in “The Happy Prince,” the guilt

57 See, for example, Jerusha McCormack, “Wilde’s fiction(s),” 105: “The first critics of ‘The Young King’ identified it as ‘Socialist’ and indeed the kernel of Wilde’s essay [‘Soul of Man’] is here, in the image of Christ the revolutionary, an adversary of personal property and prophet of personal freedom. Masked as a child’s story.” See also Jarlath Killeen, “The Fisherman and His Soul,” in The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 141-58, 141: “Isobel Murray describes [‘The Fisherman and His Soul’] as his ‘most ambitious and complex working out of the conflicts of spirit and flesh, beauty and goodness, earth and heaven,’ while Peter Raby agrees it ‘is in some ways the most substantial, complex and significant’ of the fairy tales, with clear affinities with The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891).”

brought about by the eternal presence of pain and suffering destroys beauty, and the king’s reflection condemns rather than inspires him. Thereafter in the story, the king renounces his former love of beauty in favor of an almost blasphemous imitative Christianity, whereby his redemption overrules all other concerns, including the welfare of his kingdom. Corresponding moments of self-abnegating anagnorisis occur in two of the other three tales, but the mirror moment in “The Fisherman and His Soul” acts as the key to deciphering the function of the mirror motif throughout the collection, which is to demonstrate the error of accepting any external judgment of oneself as inviolate truth. In other words, the stories in A House of Pomegranates present tragedies of personality, in which characters possessed of either personal beauty, like the Star-Child, or a love of beauty, like the Dwarf, or of both, like the young king, accept moral condemnation in lieu of developing their individuality and die or transform as a result.

Although “The Fisherman and His Soul” certainly represents what Isobel Murray called “Wilde’s most ambitious and complex working out of the conflicts of spirit and flesh, beauty and goodness, earth and heaven,” its most intriguing element for the purposes of this study exists in a brief episode involving the disembodied Soul and a magical mirror.59 The story begins with a young Fisherman who falls in love with a mermaid, but whose love remains beyond his reach without his willing excision and banishment of his soul, a clever reversal of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” (1837): “‘Thou hast a human soul,’ [the Mermaid] answered. ‘If only thou would’st send away thy soul, then could I love thee’” (205). After consorting with a witch and with the devil himself, the Fisherman successfully removes his soul, which assumes its own autonomous existence and sets out on a series of ambling journeys. The vagrant Soul possesses an almost sociopathic personality, and it indiscriminately robs, injures, or outright

59 Isobel Murray, introduction to Complete Shorter Fiction, 15.
murders many of the people it comes across during its travels. In the figure of the Soul, Wilde presents the moral sense divorced from compassion—the Fisherman refuses to give the Soul his “heart” at their initial separation; the Soul can recognize good and evil but cannot fully understand either one. When the Soul reunites with the Fisherman, however, after tempting him with the beautiful feet of a dancing girl—the one form of beauty with which the mermaid cannot compete—the Fisherman’s newly awoken sense of moral indignation at his own actions (performed at the Soul’s bidding) replaces his innocent love of beauty with bitter hate: “‘Nay,’ cried the young Fisherman, ‘I may not be at peace, for all that thou hast made me do I hate’” (229). Thereafter, the Soul tries to destroy the Fisherman’s remaining love for the mermaid—a symbol of his fierce individuality, as he has defied the church and society for love of her—by tempting him with opportunities to both violate and uphold the tenets of conventional morality, but the Fisherman’s love cannot be subdued: “‘Lo! now I have tempted thee with evil, and I have tempted thee with good, and thy love is stronger than I am’” (233). The Soul then asks “to enter [the Fisherman’s] heart,” signifying his successful integration and sublimation of the moral sense with love and beauty, an achievement that spreads to the judgmental priest after his death via the beautiful flowers that grow on his grave: “But the beauty of the white flowers troubled him, and their odour was sweet in his nostrils, and there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love” (235).60

Within this complicated narrative about the reconciliation of love, beauty, and compassion with the social forces of morality and religion, however, Wilde conceals an almost forgettable incident during the first year of the Soul’s pilgrimage that elucidates his idea of “true

60 See Wilde, “Critic as Artist,” 1024. Gilbert could be describing the essential plot of “The Fisherman and His Soul” in his discourse on conscience and virtue: “The mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate so much nowadays, and are so ignorantly proud, is a sign of our imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine.”
Wisdom” and unlocks the mystery of his other textual mirrors. When the Soul travels to the desert “city of Illal,” he asks the priests of the city temple to allow him to see their god, but they remain stubbornly evasive about the precise nature of their hidden deity. They try to deter the Soul with various excuses and then with substitute idols, but when at last the Soul sees the true god, he discovers it to be an enchanted mirror: “‘There is no god but this mirror that thou seest, for this is the Mirror of Wisdom. And it reflecteth all things that are in heaven and on earth, save only the face of him who looketh into it. This it reflecteth not, so that he who looketh into it may be wise. Many other mirrors are there, but they are mirrors of Opinion. This only is the Mirror of Wisdom’” (219-20). In other words, the only true mirror is the one that allows the viewer to move beyond mere morality, to transcend the narcissistic self-condemnation of the lowly “mirrors of Opinion.” These mirrors of the lower order appear in every other tale in A House of Pomegranates, and each time they do, the person who looks into them succumbs to mere “Opinion” at the expense of true “Wisdom,” accepting the predetermined reflection that accords with the dictates of social ideologies and moralities. Therefore, the young king sees in his mirror a selfish monarch, whose enjoyment of beautiful things is founded on pain and suffering, while the Dwarf sees a hideous monster in his mirror, which leads him to interpret his artistic triumph before the Infanta as mere ridicule. And the Star-Child sees nothing in the priest’s well but the “face of a toad,” which his judgmental society has wrought on his erstwhile beautiful face (244). In every instance, these mirrors reflect an illusion brought about by each character’s denial of his true self in exchange for an external rendering of his identity, and the result is the stunting of his individual growth due to self-loathing. Or, as Wilde writes in “The Critic as Artist,” “‘Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of the
mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is so terrible a factor in the
history of the world . . . .”  

In the first story of the collection, “The Young King,” Wilde attenuates the tragedy of his
aesthetic hero by allowing him to merely assume “the image of Christ,” rather than adopt the
literal sacrifice of a religious martyr. To begin with, Wilde employs a familiar fairy tale topos
to establish the initial trajectory of his protagonist’s development: like the countless rags-to-
riches tales that pervade the literary fairy tale tradition, “The Young King” tells of the son of a
“poor goatherd,” who ascends beyond his perceived rank into the throne itself due to some
surprising act, relationship, or information. In this case, the woodland boy happens to be the sole
living heir to the kingdom, “the child of the old King’s only daughter by a secret marriage with
one much beneath her in station” (171). Born of the princess’s love of his father’s music, this
child of art and nature leaves his sylvan home for the opulent palace “Joyeuse,” where his
“strange passion for beauty” develops into a sort of religion of art: “It was said that a stout
Burgomaster . . . had caught sight of him kneeling in real adoration before a great picture that
had just been brought from Venice, and that seemed to herald the worship of some new gods”
(173). After fostering his preternatural sense for beauty amidst the wonders of his palace, and on
the eve of his coronation, the young king experiences a moment of pure insight and happiness—a
moment that testifies to the unfettered augmentation of his personality: “Never before had he felt
so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and the mystery of beautiful things” (174). At
this point in the narrative, rather than allowing the naïve king to continue in his happiness and
self-development, Wilde introduces aggressive moralism into his tale via the medium of three

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61 See Wilde, “Critic as Artist,” 1024.
University Press, 1979), 171-252, 183. All subsequent citations of the fairy tales in this collection will refer to this
dition and will be indicated parenthetically
lucid dreams. The purpose of the dreams appears to be to convict the young king of his complicit guilt in contributing to the privation and misery of his people, and to convert him into a ruler with the alleviation of the suffering poor as his top priority.63

In contrast to the ostensibly obvious function of the three condemnatory dreams, however, I would contend that Wilde turns fairy- and folktale convention on its head and uses them as trials or tests for the strength of the young king’s burgeoning individualism.64 Confronted with the sullen discontent of the poor gold-weavers, the inhumane slave-labor of the pearl-divers, and the hideous morality play involving the disease and death surrounding the ruby mine, the young king must either accept the homiletic dreams’ indictment of the selfishness represented by his coronation attire or accept that “the material needs of Man [are] great and very permanent, but that the spiritual needs of Man [are] greater still, and that in one divine moment, and by selecting its own mode of expression, a personality might make itself perfect.”65

Although he resists for a time the dreams’ attempts to make the misery they depict his personal responsibility, the young king fails his test in the moment the pilgrim compels him to look into the mirror. Upon being told that the genocide he has just witnessed stems from the search for “‘rubies for a king’s crown,’” the young king expends the last of his will to resist the moral

63 See Rodney Shewan, “Art and Pastoral,” in Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), 53. Shewan laments the “debouch” of Wilde’s aesthetic project into simple moral polemics with the young king’s ostensible reformation following the three dreams: “It is disillusioning to find that such self-justifying purple passages [the dreams] debouch into a pantheon of conscience where Ruskinian ethics and the church-furnishings of the Oxford Movement vie for predominance.”

64 For the standard structuralist examination of “trebling” in folktales, see Vladimir Propp, “Some Other Elements of the Tale,” in Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: U of Texas P, 1968), 71-8, 74: “We shall only mention that trebling may occur among individual details of an attributive nature (the three heads of a dragon), as well as among individual functions, pairs of functions (pursuit-rescue), groups of functions, and entire moves. Repetition may appear as a uniform distribution (three tasks, three years’ service), as an accumulation (the third task is the most difficult, the third battle the worst), or may twice produce negative results before the third, successful outcome.” The young king’s three dreams would fall into the accumulative repetition category of trebling here, as the third dream represents the most grotesque and visceral scenes of suffering that the young king witnesses. It is perhaps interesting to note that Wilde utilizes trebling in two other tales in A House of Pomegranates: the tripartite search for gold pieces in “The Star-Child,” and the Soul’s three temptations in “The Fisherman and His Soul.”

65 Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1086. Wilde is here referring to Jesus’s teachings concerning the perfume Mary uses to anoint him in the presence of the disciples (Matt. 26: 6-13).
implication of the dreams with the question, “‘For what king?’” (180). But when he looks into
the pilgrim’s mirror, he conforms to the lesson of the dream and sees his own face staring back at
him. Upon waking, he rejects the beautiful accoutrements of his coronation on principle,
sermonizing like a Low Church evangelist, “‘For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands
of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the
heart of the pearl’” (180). Nevertheless, the remainder of the tale does not recount the
dissemination of the young king’s wealth, nor does it tell of the decommissioning of Joyeuse’s
beautiful treasures. Rather, the young king demonstrates his newfound moral scruples by
denying the work of his subjects—many of whom died to provide him with his beautiful regalia,
if the dreams depicted truth—and dons the woodland rags of a goatherd’s son.

Despite the protestations of his courtiers, his subjects, and the bishop of the church, the
young king insists on wearing rags to his coronation. In a moment of subtle significance, he
crowns himself with “a spray of wild briar” he finds on his balcony, anticipating the perhaps
inadvertent accusation of arrogance the bishop will utter at the story’s end: “‘A greater than I
hath crowned thee’” (184). For despite his seemingly miraculous transfiguration in the cathedral,
the young king remains fundamentally unchanged, save that he has succumbed to a tawdry sort
of moral hypocrisy as the result of his coronation performance. By denying the work of his
subjects, he denies their sacrifice without improving their conditions, a fact even the humblest
members of his kingdom—like the man in the crowd—know only too well: “And a man came

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66 See Rodney Shewan, “Art and Pastoral,” 54. Shewan also notes the apparent lack of legitimate social reform in
“The Young King,” suggesting that whatever moral improvement the main character undergoes manifests in little
more than show and ceremony: “The mistress—or minion—art, has been rejected. And yet, in terms of the narrative
framework, this rejection achieves little. The king’s subjects are not merely unappreciative, like the poor in ‘The
Happy Prince’, but hostile: unjust employers, they feel, are preferable to unemployment. The king ignores their
objections, his face saddened and his eyes on higher values, but Wilde gives no indication of future benefits in this
for the state. ‘Home’ for the Young King is still presumably the palace of art, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion
that, like the Soul in Tennyson’s poem, he wants the glory of renunciation without giving up the chance of later
reoccupation.”
out of the crowd and spake bitterly to him, and said, ‘Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. . . . Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us? And what cure hast thou for these things?’” (181-2). Indeed, the bishop also chastens the king’s superficiality in adorning himself shamefully before his kingdom, adding that the king is not superior to “‘He who made misery’” and that “‘the burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world’s sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer’” (183). The king’s response is indicative of his shallow morality, not to mention his almost blasphemous arrogance, for he equates himself with Christ and symbolically obscures him by stepping before “his image”: “‘Sayest thou that in this house?’ said the young King, and he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the image of Christ’” (183). Thus the young king has assumed a literal position of moral authority and denied the potential of his developing individualism. Henceforward, his dealings with the subjects of his kingdom will depend on his imposed status as a stand-in for Christ, and his efforts at charity, such as they are, will involve a show of compassion without the systematic reform to back it up. The king’s recognition of his reflection in the pilgrim’s mirror has wrought a type of moral narcissism; the innocent acolyte of beauty has forfeited his personality to become another wealthy hypocrite, who exploits the system for his own benefit without substantially improving it or himself.

Contrastingly, in “The Birthday of the Infanta” and “The Star-Child,” Wilde abandons simple criticism of performative or superficial moral authority like the young king’s. Instead, in these two stories, Wilde presents the consequences of allowing external standards to delineate the shape of one’s identity as quite literally fatal. When the Dwarf and the Star-Child accept the ugliness of their respective reflections in the “mirrors of Opinion,” they commence a process of
self-loathing that leads irrevocably to their deaths (“Fisherman” 220). In an ironic correlation to the young king, the misshapen Dwarf in “The Birthday of the Infanta” comes to the palace from the woods, where he lived a simple life as the son of a “charcoal-burner” (192). Strangely, though his father abandons him to the nobles on account of his being “so ugly and useless a child,” the Dwarf exhibits no knowledge of his “grotesque appearance,” but “seems quite happy and full of the highest spirits” (192). Living as a neglected and unwanted child has not dampened his spirit, for his isolation from society has protected him from exposure to its stunting ideologies and standards of conformity. Hence he assumes an equal status with the children of the Infanta’s court because he has not yet learned to judge himself inferior: “. . . and at the close of each dance he made them each the funniest of bows, smiling and nodding at them just as if he was really one of themselves, and not a little misshapen thing that Nature, in some humourous mood, had fashioned for others to mock at” (192). His dance captivates the children, especially the Infanta, who gives him a rose from her hair and requests a second dance from him later in the day. The Infanta’s gift of the white rose becomes the prevailing symbol of his innocence and love of beauty, which he treasures more than all the riches of the palace until he sees himself in the palace mirror, whereupon he “[tears] the white rose to pieces” (201).

Wilde fashions a petty society out of the flowers in the palace garden, and their brutal condemnation of the Dwarf’s ugliness illustrates the imposed social criteria—or “popular authority”—that he sees as potentially lethal to the individual personality and to art.67 The urbanely haughty flowers of the Infanta’s garden mock and insult the Dwarf, but Wilde fills their protestations with more than a little hypocrisy, as they represent hyper-cultivated nature, pruned

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67 See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1085, 1097. While describing the as-yet unseen “true personality of man,” Wilde comments that such a personality will refuse any standard external to itself: “Nor will it admit any laws but its own laws; nor any authority but its own authority.” Elsewhere in the essay, during his discussion on the various forms of art, and specifically the novel, Wilde extends his comments on the detrimental effects of “popular authority” to all aspects of the development of the individual: “Popular authority and the recognition of popular authority are fatal.”

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and clipped and cross-bred into the precise shapes, colors, and scents most admired by the society of the court. Indeed, in the bulbous cactus plant’s insulting assessment of the Dwarf’s repulsiveness, Wilde’s jibe at the delusional members of his floral society becomes most evident: “‘He is a perfect horror!’ screamed the Cactus. ‘Why, he is twisted and stumpy, and his head is completely out of proportion with his legs’” (193). Whereas the stagnant, developmentally complacent flowers pour derision on the Dwarf, the unrestrained, effervescent birds adore him.68

The flowers do not approve of the birds’ playfulness with the Dwarf, and in another example of the narrow-mindedness of their ilk, they invoke another social distinction between themselves and those creatures with “not even a permanent address”: “‘It only shows,’ [the flowers] said, ‘what a vulgarizing effect this incessant rushing and flying about has. Well-bred people always stay exactly in the same place, as we do’” (195). While he remains blithely ignorant of these censures, however, the Dwarf accepts no judgment but the happy dreams of his own vivid imagination, and he revels in his joy.

In a procession through opulent rooms filled with every conceivable object of beauty that recalls the Soul’s advance toward the “Mirror of Wisdom,” the Dwarf searches the palace for the Infanta. But unlike the Soul, the Dwarf sees only himself in the mirror, and his realization destroys his innocence and individuality. In a moment of self-destructive identity delineation, the Dwarf allows the reflection in the “mirror of Opinion” to retroactively interpret the events of his day at the palace: he acknowledges first his difference from the other children, then the ugliness associated with that difference, and finally the ridicule his ugliness must have elicited from his audience, including the beautiful Infanta. In other words, he comes to define himself based on the reactions of others instead of his own feelings and imaginings; he accepts a self-image

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68 Birds are often associated with the unrestricted or enlightened personality in Wilde’s tales, including the noble swallow in “The Happy Prince” and the romantic nightingale in “The Nightingale and the Rose.” Indeed, only the pedantic linnet in “The Devoted Friend” violates this characteristic in the fairy tale collections.
constructed and condemned by the shallow society of the court. Judy Price notes the import of this Lacanian confrontation in her analysis of the tale, and she suggests that, in line with Wilde’s other inversions of fairy tale convention, the mirror provides the opposite effect to its typical distortion of reality in fairy tale narratives: “[The Dwarf] is reeducated as soon as he encounters the mirror. The mirror sets the boundaries of the culture for him. . . . The mirror here does not distort the norm, but defines it for the Dwarf. He appears to himself as he appears to the dominant order . . .”\(^{69}\) Subsequently, the Dwarf succumbs to a pathetic death by broken heart, the performance of which is so melodramatic that the children believe he is putting on another show for their amusement. As cruel as the Infanta’s blasé response to the Dwarf’s death may seem, Wilde’s narrative nevertheless insists that the Dwarf’s final testament to pain reveals the failure of his developing Individualism. By contrast, the proper path to Individualism involves the Dwarf’s performance before the court and his time in the garden, where his personality “express[ed] itself through joy.” His experience with the mirror and its aftermath is merely an expression of pain, and “pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings” (*SOMUS* 1103). In other words, the expression of pain and self-loathing relies entirely on a comparison with something other than the individual; thus, thanks to his glance in the mirror, the Dwarf has relinquished what Rodney Shewan terms “his self-sufficient world” and become one of dominant society’s mere “puppets” (201).\(^{70}\)

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\(^{70}\) Rodney Shewan, “Art and Pastoral,” 61. The reference to puppets comes from the Infanta’s comparison between the dying Dwarf and the marionettes she watched earlier in the day, whose performance she now deems more “natural” than the Dwarf’s.
In “The Star-Child,” the final tale in the collection, Wilde combines the narrative elements of his other stories into an account of intense moral reformation. The main character is possessed of incredible beauty and comes from royalty, like the young king, but he is brought up by a poor Woodcutter in a village of “swarthy and black-haired” peasants, where his remarkable beauty sets him apart and teaches him pride. In return for his haughtiness, his disguised mother apparently causes him to grow hideous in appearance, like the Dwarf, and the village ostracizes him on account of his ugliness just as he had previously done to them. The remainder of the story deals with his punishment and moral rehabilitation, which takes more than three years to complete and results in his premature death. Initially, the Star-Child tries to assert his independence and superiority to the Puritanical moral code of his surroundings; he declares his autonomy in words that recall Wilde’s comments on the transcendence of Individualism and art in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” and “The Decay of Lying” (1889): “‘Who art thou to question me what I do? I am no son of thine to do thy bidding’” (242).

Fittingly, the moment of reflection and moral assimilation in this tale occurs immediately following the Star-Child’s introduction to his mother, who is disguised as a beggar-woman and thus destroys any claims to superiority the proud boy has established for himself: “‘If in very truth thou art my mother,’ he said, ‘it had been better hadst thou stayed away, and not come here to bring me to shame, seeing that I thought I was the child of some Star, and not a beggar’s child, as thou tellest me that I am’” (243). Brought to “shame,” the Star-Child’s beauty and sense of individuality disappears; when he gazes into the well, he sees only “the face of a toad,” and he immediately ascribes the transformation to his immorality: “‘Surely this has come upon me by reason of my sin’” (244).

71 See Wilde, “Soul of Man,” 1082, 1087: “No form of compulsion must be exercised over [man]. If there is, his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others. And by work I simply mean activity of any kind. . . . all authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and degrades those over whom it is exercised.” See also Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 970-992, 982: “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance.”
The rest of the Star-Child’s short life is spent in cruel, repetitive tests of his conformation to the exacting moral code of his almost supernatural parents, who appear and disappear in various guises throughout the story. They offer no explanation for his early exile among the villagers. In the end, however, Wilde reminds the reader that the “fire of [the Star-Child’s] testing” was so intense that he died after only three years on the throne, and his successor, who “ruled evilly,” presumably eradicated all of his good works (252).

Although they contain many of the structural conceits and literary conventions of traditional, didactic children’s literature, Wilde’s fairy tales nonetheless challenge the unqualified laudability of moral conformity. Undoubtedly, Wilde believed that kindness, compassion, and especially love were integral components of even the most highly developed Individualist, as his most intimate writing reflects the importance of these qualities quite plainly. However, to the end of his life, Wilde continued to despise any systematized approach to social behavior, like conventional morality, that puts limits on the freedom of the personality through its tendency to homogenize the diversity of mankind under hegemonic terms like “good” and “evil.” In the long letter to Lord Alfred Douglas commonly called “De Profundis,” which Wilde wrote from prison in 1897, for example, Wilde expresses his admiration for Christ as the greatest Individualist and poet, precisely because he denied the reductive authority of mere “laws” in favor of the more singular—and thus more important—“exceptions”: “Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike: as if anybody, or anything for that matter, was like aught else in the world. For him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely.”72 Everywhere in Wilde’s letters, dialogues, essays, and fiction, one finds at least a trace of his universal reprobation of conformity at the expense of individual development and expression. In The Picture of Dorian Gray,

72 Wilde, “De Profundis,” 931.
Dorian’s willingness to adopt and imitate Lord Henry’s maxims corrupts the unfettered
development of his personality; Arthur Savile’s overly rigid sense of duty and social propriety
leads him to attempt atrocious acts of homicide in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”; Lady Chiltern’s
stringent moral scruples nearly destroy her husband’s life and their marriage in “An Ideal
Husband.” The list of such examples could go on. Yet it is arguably in the fairy tales that Wilde
makes his most direct appeal to the reader to look beyond the narrow confines of moral
hegemony and see the undeniable potential and natural beauty of the “true personality of man,”
the unmolested, uninhibited individual whose compulsory adherence to “a story with a moral”
remains a perpetually “dangerous thing” (“Devoted Friend” 125).
CHAPTER V

“ALL TIMES, IN ALL PLACES”: KIPLING AND THE NARRATIVE OF PERENNIALITY

The King’s peace dies with the King. The custom then is that all laws are outlaw, and men do what they will till the new King is chosen.

– Sir Richard Dalyngridge, *Rewards and Fairies*

This comment, with its somewhat cynical interpretation of “*Le Roi est mort! Vive le Roi,*” demonstrates an aspect of Kipling’s writing that critics too often wholly ignore or recast as sentimental nostalgia for the vanquished past or an insatiable need for cultural anchoring, or “sense of belonging.”¹ Spoken by the Norman knight Sir Richard Dalyngridge during the final tale in *Rewards and Fairies* (1910)—the second installment in a two-book series of historical character studies intended for children—the statement conveys an unorthodox historical perspective to Kipling’s young audience. The context of the tale involves the surprising and rather pathetic reappearance of the dispossessed and presumed dead King Harold II at a hunting party organized for King Henry I, son of William the Conqueror. The embarrassing meeting of the two monarchs, one Saxon and one Norman, further undermines the already messy succession of the Norman invaders, who are squabbling amongst themselves over control of England. Harold’s troubling presence recalls the ease with which an entire culture can be subdued and assimilated—the crazed king has reputedly spent the years since Hastings visiting the defunct shrines of various Saxon saints—but he dies knowing that, as Rahere the jester says, “‘all the world’s crazy chessboard neither mock nor judge thee’” (*RF* 262).

With this powerful image—the humbled yet honored Saxon king dying in the Norman
king’s pavilion, his greatest champion the king’s sardonic jester—Kipling ends his *Puck* stories,
which, as numerous critics have asserted, were meticulously arranged by their author.² However,
Kipling’s critics have historically chosen to sublimate or dismiss the thematic disjunction
produced by the two tales that end these collections—that is “The Treasure and the Law” and
“The Tree of Justice”—following John Coates’s advice to treat them as anomalies, the odd-men-
out that “may, and in fact should, be considered separately.”³ Undoubtedly, any
conceptualization of British history as an unbroken, linear march of progress loses some of its
luster in “The Tree of Justice,” as the defeated Saxon king receives a poignant veneration while
the Norman ruler rants about the need for an immutable “Law” that will transcend individual
kings, though his own family will consign the realm to chaos and bring about the end of the
Norman dynasty. Additionally, and contrary to his detractors’ expectations, Kipling does not
laud the conquering heroes of British history in *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and
Fairies*, but rather redeems the fallen, the obscure, the vagabonds, and the survivors from those
who would “mock” or “judge” them unfairly.⁴ In doing so, he presents a modified cyclical view
of history, a “crazy chessboard” on which the affairs of mankind continuously buzz in complex
yet inescapably repetitive patterns—a view that collapses the hierarchical strata of history into

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² See, for example, Corinne McCutchan, “Puck & Co.: Reading *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies* as a
Romance,” *Children’s Literature* 20 (1992): 69-89, 71: “That Kipling intended the Puck books to be some kind of
unified text is evident in their structure: a frame narrative used in combination with the books’ basic formal unit, the
“[Kipling] also experimented with structural effects: parallelisms between the frame and the story itself; narrators
with different or conflicting perspectives; compression, symbolism and ambiguity. In these volumes covert
structuring devices also include the framing of the collections between the first and last stories and the frequent
necessity for expressing the same theme in a poem or story.”

³ John Coates, “Thor and Tyr: Sacrifice, Necessary Suffering, and the Battle against Disorder in *Rewards and

⁴ See Roger Lancelyn Green, “Take of English earth as much…..,” in *Kipling and the Children* (London: Elek
Books, 1965), 197-213, 198: “And, once again, it was not to the pomp and circumstance, ‘the captains and the
kings’ that he looked so much as to the simple men and women whose everyday toil had made the land what it was.”
one relatively uniform series of events. \(^5\) In fact, in this chapter I argue that many of Kipling’s narratives for children contain a heretofore unexamined undercurrent of skepticism for the notion of historical progress culminating in British imperialism that so many of his critics claim to have seen unceasingly advocated in his work. \(^6\) Moreover, I contend that Kipling’s stories often focus on the fragility and superficiality of ethnic or chronological eminence, casting the notion of imperial or racial sovereignty repeatedly into doubt. Similarly, Kipling’s ostensible adherence to an ecumenical, universal moral code delineated as the “Law” in his stories may not be as rigidly uncompromising as it appears. In the so-called “Mowgli stories” of The Jungle Book (1894) and The Second Jungle Book (1895), for instance, Kipling toys with the notion of an eternal, incorruptible “Law of the Jungle,” only to have his animal characters regularly amend, ignore, or otherwise evade its precepts in the pursuit of their own interests. Moreover, Mowgli’s progress, from the itinerant Man-Cub to the Master of the Jungle, evinces less the steady evolution of an ignorant boy developing into wise adulthood than the haphazard exploits of a violent child who ends his days as an unpredictable (and basically uncontrollable) “servant” of the British Raj—much like the erratic, irrepressible Man-Cub he is at the outset of his time in the jungle.

Accordingly, I also suggest that Kipling uses a nonsequential narrative structure to discourage

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\(^{5}\) See Angus Wilson, The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Works (New York: Viking, 1977), 292-3: “The cyclical view of history which marks Puck of Pook’s Hill (1906) and Rewards and Fairies (1910) was a well-established theory of the nineteenth century, deriving, as Kipling derives his, from the decline of the Roman Empire.” While I am certainly not the first to posit a cyclical historical view for Kipling’s Puck stories (and other works), I contend that his philosophy of dissolution and reconstitution lacks the sort of teleological trajectory of someone like Carlyle, whose vision of historical falls and rises contains a distinct overtone of the progressive sentiment, of the heroically willed improvement of the race. For Kipling, by contrast, history becomes uncompromisingly nonlinear in the later works of his career, adopting as they do a narrative mode that transforms chance encounters, arbitrary decisions, and unfulfilled ambitions into leit-motifs.

\(^{6}\) See, for one of many examples, Jonah Raskin, “Imperia Romana,” in The Mythology of Imperialism: A Revolutionary Critique of British Literature and Society in the Modern Age (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 103-110, 103: “Kipling twisted history to sanction colonialism, capitalism, racism. For Kipling history was a succession of empires; the British Empire was the culmination of world history.” See also Edward Said, “The Pleasures of Imperialism” in Culture and Imperialism (New York: Vintage, 1993), 132-162, 134: “[Kipling] is writing not just from the dominating viewpoint of a white man in a colonial possession, but from the perspective of a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning, and history had acquired the status of a virtual fact of nature. Kipling assumes a basically uncontested empire.”
progressive, or causal, reading, relying instead on overt similarities between stories and characters to emphasize the perennial cycles of historical and personal events.\(^7\)

Instead of communicating a sense of coherence or discernible purpose in the broadly historical or more personal events they describe, Kipling’s narratives typically lend to history an almost futile oscillatory movement like the ebb and flow of the tide in De Aquila’s well at Pevensey. Characters improve their situations, financially or morally, only to find themselves in new troubles that dwarf their previous trials in terms of scale, asking “What else could I have done?” to register their awareness of intractable fate’s bitter yoke.\(^8\) Others unwillingly contribute to the detriment of the cause or people they care about most. Still others work with an unimpeachable assiduity to achieve something that is ultimately accomplished through mere chance. The most conspicuous ideological constant in Kipling’s mutable worldview, in fact, appears to be the image of chaos narrowly checked—that ever-present threat of total social disintegration personified by Tabaqui the jackal and the wild dogs known as the dhole of the Dekkan in *The Jungle Books*, and by the rebel-rousing French émigrés in Philadelphia, the ever-encroaching “Winged Hats” of the Northmen around Hadrian’s Wall, or the perennial lust for gold and power that taints the motives of the Normans and so many others in the *Puck* stories. In short, Kipling makes a habit of exposing the flaws in the refined jewel of history and its instruments of social order, reminding his readers, as Harold II reminds King Henry’s court, how

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\(^7\) See Corinne McCutchan, “Puck & Co.,” 72. The unusual arrangement and thematic unity of the *Puck* books have long remained points of contention among Kipling scholars. Nevertheless, Kipling’s cryptic comments about the works in his notoriously unreliable autobiography, *Something of Myself* (1937), have led his critics to unearth the foundations of his historical enterprise, though the endeavor has been an indefatigable challenge: “Even if arranged in a neat linear order, the stories in the *Puck* books would not form a continuous history of England—centuries, including most of the nineteenth, are omitted. Moreover, as Hinchcliffe found, no single theme can adequately embrace the whole collection, unless it is a theme so broad as to be virtually meaningless.”

\(^8\) See Kipling, *Rewards and Fairies*, 66, 100, 131, 174, etc. The phrase remains a thematic mantra throughout the stories in the collection, signifying each character’s resignation to the limitations of fate, the available “moves” on Rahere’s “crazy chessboard.” Read rhetorically, however, the question implies the possibility of other, perhaps less detrimental, choices, highlighting not the noble fortitude of the one who submits to the demands of position, but rather the flaws in a rigid system with a severely limited tolerance for change.
tenuously and briefly they hold their place in time’s whirlpool and how quickly and drastically their fortunes can change.

According to Edmund Wilson, in his polemical essay “The Kipling that Nobody Read” (1941), Kipling’s literary career was dominated by an insecurity over political and domestic stability that verged at times on hysteria. Wilson attributes what he dubs Kipling’s “moral panic” to an almost childish notion of the fear of illness or weakness:

It is a key to the whole work of Kipling that the great celebrant of physical courage should prove in the long run to convey his most moving and convincing effects in describing moral panic. Kipling’s bullyings and killings are contemptible: they are the fantasies of the physically helpless. The only authentic heroism to be found in the fiction of Kipling is the heroism of moral fortitude on the edge of a nervous collapse.9

In an early instance of what has become the modus operandi for Kipling studies, Wilson assumes the “moral panic” or “nervous collapse” that comprises Kipling’s “most moving and convincing effects” stems from some biographical source. Hence, his work’s obsession with darkness must result from his own diminishing eyesight, and the frequent references to illness in his stories must each correspond to one of the many well-documented maladies from which he suffered on various continents. Even such a pervasive thematic element as the brave resilience of his heroes in the face of ontological angst becomes merely the textual referent of the author’s personal and political malaise. It is not surprising that such an argument should have been made—biographical criticism is at least as old as the schools of old historicism and psychoanalysis, if not much older. However, the alternative reading of this ubiquitous element of Kipling’s oeuvre—namely, that the “nervous collapse” constantly threatening the established order of

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Kipling’s narrative worlds signifies a permeating, universal condition that transcends the individual (outlining a dark modernism not unlike that of his contemporary, Joseph Conrad)—remains largely absent from the critical discourse. Kipling’s “bullyings and killings” are not reducible to mere “fantasies” of their infirm and emotionally mercurial author; they stand for the absurd brutality of the human condition, for the barbarous violence and myopic self-interest that lie at the root of each civilization, and that invariably lead to the perennial dissolution of “Cities and Thrones and Powers” (PH 117).

Kipling’s own comments on his works for children, particularly the Puck stories, are flippant and scarce, leaving his critics to rely rather too heavily on one paragraph in Something of Myself (1937)—that collection of dubious ruminations that serves as the closest extant approximation to an autobiography of the author. Interestingly, Kipling casts the stories in the two Puck collections as “a sort of balance to, as well as a seal upon, some aspects of my ‘Imperialistic’ output in the past,” suggesting that these books might mark an ideological shift in his work, a potential valedictory, or “seal upon,” the perceived political dogma of his former writing. In the most oft-quoted passage, Kipling describes the axiomatic “What else could I have done?” of Rewards and Fairies as his “underwood . . . the plinth of all structures” and subsequently relates the composition of the stories in a sustained analogy of design: “It was like working lacquer and mother-of-pearl, a natural combination, into the same scheme as niello and grisaille, and trying not to let the joins show.”

10 The son of an architectural sculptor and designer, Kipling often used decorative analogies to describe his own art, but there seems to be an echo of his ambivalent poem “The Return” (1903), with its glib characterization of England as

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just so much “putty, brass, an’ paint” resonating in this particular design metaphor.\textsuperscript{11} The lustrous surfaces of “lacquer and mother-of-pearl” typically conceal the imperfections of underlying materials, while “niello” and “grisaille” are artistic techniques that provide the illusion of depth or detail to harsher, more simplistic mediums. The implication of Kipling’s comparison seems to be that England’s rough-hewn history required a great deal of overlaying and embellishment in his two collections of stories, an inference he corroborates in another, less prolifically quoted comment on beginning the stories for \textit{Puck of Pook’s Hill}. Encouraged by his father to “‘look up [his] references rather more carefully,,’” Kipling attempts to maintain a rigid historical authenticity in his initial stories, only to discover that such rigorously researched accounts make dismal literary narratives: “[A discarded tale about Daniel Defoe] turned out a painstaking and meritorious piece of work, overloaded with verified references, with about as much feeling to it as a walking-stick. . . . Evidently my Daemon would not function in brickyards or schoolrooms. Therefore, like Alice in Wonderland, I turned my back on the whole thing and walked the other way.”\textsuperscript{12} Such a conscious act of revisionism surely conveys more than the artist’s customary assertion of creative license; rather, I contend that Kipling’s very style of composition reveals his subversive view of history as a self-perpetuating artifice. When combined with Kipling’s alternative historical figure of the “crazy chessboard” and his repeated depictions of chaos scarcely averted, his treatment of history as artifice fully dismisses any notion of an “uncontested” British Empire, an institution representing “the culmination of world

\textsuperscript{11} See Rudyard Kipling, “The Return,” in \textit{The Five Nations} (New York: Doubleday, 1903), 210-13. The complete refrain from which the excerpt is taken reads as follows: “\textit{If England was what England seems, / An’ not the England of our dreams, / But only putty, brass, an’ paint, / ’Ow quick we’d chuck ’er! But she ain’t!}” Although the non-italicized interjection at the end appears to contradict the whole hypothetical question that precedes it, the tenor and thematic content of the poem as a whole suggest an undaunted suspicion that perhaps England is little more than an illusionary construct. The poem’s palpable ambivalence renders the terminal “But she ain’t!” feebly ineffectual and possibly deliberately ironic.

\textsuperscript{12} Kipling, \textit{Something of Myself}, 109-10.
history.” In its place, Kipling offers a profoundly skeptical philosophy of history as a series of chance encounters, narrow escapes, and improbable reiterations—a synchronic history that provides a tentative sense of order through repetition and familiarity, while simultaneously deconstructing the idea of uninterrupted connectivity between the present and the past. In short, Kipling’s narratives of perenniality finally repudiate the conventional doctrine of Victorian progress.

“And so was England born!”: Destabilizing Historical Progress in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*

Kipling’s unorthodox use of structural ordering and thematic coherence provides a ready means with which to evaluate his presentation of history in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, though that presentation is deceptively simple. Beginning with the mythical “Weland’s Sword,” in which a Nordic god devolves into a wayside blacksmith, and ending with “The Treasure and the Law,” which involves a Jewish immigrant indirectly compelling the avaricious English barons to draw up the Magna Charta by destroying plundered gold, the stories in the collection can be read causally, as Puck prompts Dan and Una to read them near the end: “‘Well,’ said Puck, calmly, ‘what did you think of it? Weland gave the Sword! The Sword gave the Treasure, and the Treasure gave the Law. It’s as natural as an oak growing’” (*PH* 208). However, there exist

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13 See note 6 above.

14 See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 14. Moretti provides a nice working definition of the historical cycle that corresponds with my own employment of the term above, though my contention would remain that mere repetition does not necessarily connote “order” in the hierarchical sense: “. . . the fact, I mean, that cycles constitute *temporary structures within the historical flow* . . . Structures, because they introduce repetition in history, and hence regularity, order, pattern; and temporary, because they’re short (ten, twenty, fifty years, this depends on the theory).”

15 For the standard explication of Victorian progress as social ideology, see Jerome H. Buckley, “The Idea of Progress,” in *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 34-52. Interestingly, Buckley points to Kipling’s short story “The Bridge-Builders” (1898) for his “last ironic comment” on “the delusions of strength and progress.” For a much more recent treatment of Victorian progress, see Hilary Fraser, “Writing the Past,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830-1914*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108-126, 111: “It is undoubtedly the case that the vaunted Victorian faith in progress was chronically beset by anxieties, the fast-moving trajectory of modernity shot through by ambivalently retrospective cross-currents.”
several irritating problems with this tidy, seemingly linear interpretation of events. To begin with, Weland gives his runic sword to Hugh, a Saxon novice, who loses it almost immediately to Sir Richard Dalyngride, the Norman knight. Hugh and Sir Richard become friends, and Hugh regains his sword in time to fight some gorillas with it as an involuntary member of a Viking raiding party, winning West African gold but losing his right arm in the process. The gold returns to England, only to sit in the Norman baron De Aquila’s well until Kadmiel, the Jewish bookkeeper, hurls it into the sea in the attempt to prevent the continuation of war between the odious King John and his greedy barons. With such an unlikely (and completely arbitrary, in terms of direct causality) chain of occurrences, stretched out over centuries and across vast distances, it comes as little surprise when Dan responds to Puck’s question with “I don’t understand” (PH 208). I suggest that the events leading to the “Law”—which Kipling presents as a conservative measure, only accidentally democratizing, taken by the barons in order to hold onto their lands and wealth—are anything but progressive or linear. They are instead, as Puck avows, more readily likened to the organic, capricious growth of an oak tree, a natural, and therefore irrational, process of development.

Nevertheless, even chaotic nature has her patterns, and the one most common to Kipling’s stories is loss: the loss of Weland’s divinity, the loss of Hugh’s lands and arm, the loss of the gold. Indeed, the theme of loss appears in the collection’s inaugural poem, prefacing the

16 See Stephen Prickett, “Worlds Within Worlds: Kipling and Nesbit,” in Victorian Fantasy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 198-239, 211. Puck’s summation of the book’s supposed “moral” has long annoyed even the most conservative critics. Even Prickett, whose interpretations of Kipling’s work typically involve little more than an explication of its superficial allegory and obvious symbolism, cannot fully accept Puck’s convenient outline of the book’s major events: “It is left to Puck to point to the final moral. . . . We are almost convinced, and yet . . . Puck’s confident political wisdom seems to echo the voices of Maximus and De Aquila, not of Parnesius and Richard. Not for the first time we are aware of two voices in Kipling that seem to be saying very different things.”

17 See John McBratney, “The Puck Books,” in Imperial Subjects, Imperial Space: Rudyard Kipling’s Fiction of the Native-Born (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 133-163, 143. As McBratney suggests, Dan’s confusion likely stems in part from the books’ disordered presentation of the various individual narratives, which disrupts the sort of linear, causal chain that Puck proffers the children: “The settings of the other tales shift from prehistoric to Napoleonic Britain with what seems a deliberate attempt to foil any expectation of historical progress.”
following tales with its epigraph of social decay and disintegration: “Trackway and Camp and City lost, / Salt Marsh where now is corn; / Old Wars, old Peace, old Arts that cease, / And so was England born!” (*PH* 42). By virtue of its position—opposite the clause “Salt Marsh where now is corn”—“And so was England born!” might be read as the country’s miraculous cultivation out of an inhospitable soil. However, the concluding comment follows on the heels of Kipling’s oscillatory interpretation of history, in which “Old Wars” move in lockstep with “old Peace” and the “old Arts” of men are made only to “cease.” Thus, England’s birth appears, not as the telos of European history, but as the accidental result of centuries of cultural conquest, moral recidivism, and lost causes, from which it shall not remain exempt.\(^\text{18}\) In addition to the numerous poetic references to loss scattered throughout the book, the method by which Puck introduces and dismisses each story recalls the theme of futility and loss. Although he promises the children that they shall have complete access to the past, without the encumbrances of “Doubt and Fear,” Puck closes each narrative session by giving the children “memory-magicking” leaves of Oak, Ash, and Thorn trees. These organic talismans cause Dan and Una to forget everything they have heard that day, rendering the entire story-telling operation moot in most cases.\(^\text{19}\) Although the magic leaves are on one level merely a narrative gimmick introduced to give the random appearance of figures from the distant past some additional supernatural buffering, they also reiterate the book’s pervasive theme of loss, which ties into its treatment of historical

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\(^\text{18}\) See Kipling, “Cities and Thrones and Powers,” in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, 117. Kipling’s poetic speaker expresses this sentiment in no uncertain terms, asserting that history resembles a field of flowers, wherein one year’s “Daffodil” remains ignorant of “what change, what chance, what chill, / Cut down last year’s.” Such historical solipsism leads to an unfounded confidence in one’s position: “But with bold countenance, / And knowledge small, / Esteems her seven days’ continuance / To be perpetual.”

\(^\text{19}\) See Kipling, “On the Great Wall,” in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, 133-148, 133. In the beginning of this tale, as well as in the one that follows it, Dan and Una appear to regain their memory of Parnesius and his long narrative about Roman occupied Britain once they see him or Puck: “‘Gently!’ said Puck. ‘What are you looking for?’ ‘Parnesius, of course,’ Dan answered. ‘We’ve only just remembered yesterday. It isn’t fair.’” Obviously, when Kipling felt the need to break up the longer stories in the collection, he allowed a bit of leeway regarding the memory-wiping at the terminations of each section. Otherwise, he would have needed his characters to retell their entire story from the beginning each time they appeared.
discontinuity. As each story fades from their memories, Dan and Una begin anew in their understanding of England’s eclectic history, which results in an episodic cycling among the tales and, interpreted more literally, renders the whole enterprise rather futile. After all, if the children greet each new historical personage with little better than spotty memories of what they have heard before, then how can any sense of linear progression or hierarchical chronology be maintained? Certainly, the Norman knights are not consistently presented as more or less “civilized” than the Roman garrison on Hadrian’s Wall, nor does Sir Harry Dawe seem more or less “advanced” than Hugh the Saxon. Rather, Kipling chooses for his most conspicuous theme the transience or futility of man’s vain institutions and ambitions: Parnesius the Centurion’s ruined career, Maximus’ ill-fated bid to be Emperor of Britain, Hugh and Dalyngridge’s pointless “joyous venture” to Africa for gold that winds up on the bottom of the sea.

Even the runes etched on Weland’s sword fail to indicate a coherent causal chain between its forging and the establishment of inchoate democratic law in England. The runes are decidedly not, as Sarah Wintle affirms, “the story of the forging of a race and its imperial destiny,” though they certainly do predict some elements of the plots of the succeeding stories, albeit cryptically. According to Puck’s narration, Weland arrives in England on a Danish pirate ship during one of their many raids on the Anglo-Saxons sometime during the ninth or tenth century. Despite the Nordic god’s insistence that he shall “rule England . . . from Lincolnshire to the Isle of Wight,” Puck predicts his inevitable fall from glory, evoking the cyclical pattern of history that governs the tales he will subsequently proctor for the children: “‘First they were Gods. Then they were People of the Hills, and then they flitted to other places because they couldn’t get on with the English for one reason or another. . . . I knew that presently [Weland would] have to come down in the world—like the other Old Things’” (PH 50-2). Throughout the book, in fact, Puck

20 Sarah Wintle, introduction to Puck of Pook’s Hill, 18.
exemplifies his simultaneously descriptive and ambiguous moniker “Old Thing,” serving as an embodiment of England and its history, which is undoubtedly very old, but also protean and forgetful—an ageless, nameless “thing” that remains hard to understand and even harder to define.\(^{21}\) As Corinne McCutchan has suggested, Puck ostensibly encompasses an abstract idea of “Englishness”—with all of its contradictory, occasionally ineffable elements—within his character, acting as the country’s “genius loci” even as he helps to reconceptualize that country in terms of its labyrinthine past: “As he harmonizes himself with each narrator in turn, he creates an impression of plenitude, of possessing rather than merely mirroring the best and most essentially English qualities of each and uniting them within himself as a composite personification of all.”\(^{22}\) However, Puck’s collected abundance of such disparate character qualities renders him almost indecipherable: he is one of the “People of the Hills” without their limitations, seemingly both above and below the personages he introduces in terms of authority.

With equal ambiguity, the “Runes of Prophecy” inscribed on Weland’s blade relate their message in polyvalent language, claiming that “The Gold I gather . . . is not given / For goods or gear, / But for The Thing” \((PH 116)\). Many commentators have read this mention of “The Thing” as an explicit reference to Kipling’s always enigmatic concept of “The Law,” but one wonders why in this instance he would have chosen not to use the more definite and familiar term.\(^{23}\) If the

\(^{21}\) For an example of Puck’s forgetfulness, see “On the Great Wall,” in \textit{Puck of Pook’s Hill}, 133-148, 139. When Parnesius asks Puck if he recalls the shrine he built in his honor, Puck confuses it with another, asking, “‘Which? The stone one with the line from Xenophon?’” See also “Weland’s Sword” in the same volume, 43-60, 51: “‘He was called Weland, and he was smith to some gods. I’ve forgotten their names, but he used to make them swords and spears.’”

\(^{22}\) Corinne McCutchan, “Puck & Co.,” 75.

\(^{23}\) See, for example, Shamsul Islam, “Education in the Law in Four Children’s Books,” in \textit{Kipling’s ‘Law’: A Study of His Philosophy of Life} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1975), 121-142, 138: “The gathering of Gold is described as a step that leads to the achievement of the Thing. . . . The Sword may well be a symbol of the Imperial Idea, which leads to the establishment of the Empire and possession of Gold. The next step in this process of evolution is the promulgation of the Thing or the Law.” See also Andrew Lycett, \textit{Rudyard Kipling} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 380: “It is testimony to the power of [Kipling’s] daemon that, at a time when this reactionary Conservative was railing against the betrayal of Empire, he could write stories with an alternative Whig
poem is to be read within the context of the collection, I think it far more likely that “The Thing”
merely indicates the gorilla that bit into the sword’s blade during Hugh’s battle in the African
jungle: “‘Body to body there, by stark strength of sword and hand, had Hugh slain him, and,
dying, the Thing had clenched his teeth on the sword. Judge what teeth they were!’” (PH 92).
Indeed, the gold the travelers accumulate comes to them as recompense for their ridding the
natives of the ravaging gorillas, so in effect, “the Gold [they] gather . . . is not given / for goods
or gear / But for The Thing.” That is, they obtain the gold by rendering an afflicted people a
valuable service. Alternatively, “The Thing” could stand as a sort of verbal effigy for the
indissoluble amalgam that is England, as it does for the indefinable Puck (it is no coincidence
that Kipling uses the same appellation to refer to his supernatural master of ceremonies). Read
this way, Weland’s runes could outline the invariable cycles of composite England’s turbid
history rather than affirming some teleological imperial destiny. After all, the cadence of the
runic poem is one of conspicuous oscillation rather than unidirectionality, employing as it does
the image of rising and falling in “deep Water”: “The Gold I gather / Comes into England / Out
of deep Water. // Like a shining Fish / Then it descends / Into deep Water. . . . The Gold I gather
/ Is drawn up / Out of deep Water. // Like a shining Fish / Then it descends / Into deep Water”
(PH 116). With its rhythmic pattern of rising and falling gold, the runic poem recalls both the
mythical figure of Fortuna, the Roman goddess with her eternally spinning wheel, and the
historical model set forth in “Puck’s Song,” with its mention of England’s “Old Wars” and
equally “old Peace.” In any event, it seems unlikely that Kipling intended the poem to be read as
simply another homage to “The Law” or as some runic roadmap of England’s manifest destiny.

interpretation of history, in which England progresses, with stately inevitability, from superstition and barbarism to
parliamentary government, or ‘The Thing’, a central myth of its people.”
The events of *Puck of Pook’s Hill* illustrate very little in the line of imperial futures or national birthrights. Given the historically evocative, pendulous language of the intermittent poems that frame each tale in the collection, as well as the plot points of the collection’s two main narratives, Kipling’s presentation of England’s history appears to be one of shifting fortunes—and I mean this literally, as the actual fortune ensconced in De Aquila’s castle well shifts continually with the tide—and futile ambitions.\(^{24}\) Despite his noble, heroic qualities, the Roman general Maximus fails to see the real value in subalterns like Parnesius and fails in his campaign to rule both Britain and Gaul. Parnesius guards a forsaken wall in the north of Rome’s forgotten province, where the increasing disregard of *Dea Roma* makes his courageous efforts against the Picts and “Winged Hats” seem foolish and insufficient. And the honorable Norman baron De Aquila, with his boon companions Sir Richard and Hugh the Saxon, must resort to sordid blackmail and bribery to prevent the taking of his lands in Pevensey and thus the probable invasion of Robert, Duke of Normandy, whose great grand-nephew Henry Plantagenet would come from France less than fifty years later to claim the English crown. Multiple examples of thwarted or misguided aspiration pervade the book, culminating in “The Treasure and the Law,” wherein the most oppressed and persecuted of immigrants provides the nascent democratic element the unscrupulous English could not.\(^{25}\) Arguably, such a “history,” full of instances of compromised morality, ugly cynicism, and fruitless “ventures,” occupies a position diametrically

\(^{24}\) See Fred Inglis, “Girl or boy: home and away,” in *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 146-171, 158. Inglis argues that Kipling sets forth an atavistic vision in place of linear chronology, a method which disrupts any possible directionality in his presentation of England’s past: “The history of England in *Puck* and *Rewards and Fairies* doesn’t go anywhere; all we sense with the children is the darkness and mystery of power, the irresistible darkness of the call to duty, the thrilling intrigue the other side of allusion . . . . The idea of England transcends the real history of empire, devastation, invasion, and re-colonization.”

\(^{25}\) See Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 110. Interestingly, Kipling saw the last of the stories of *Puck of Pook’s Hill* as somewhat out of place or of a disproportionate thematic gravity. His brief comment on the tale suggests that he may have allowed the bleakness of his historical vision too much leeway in its composition: “Qua workmanship, [‘Dymchurch Flit’] and two night-pieces in ‘Cold Iron’ (Rewards and Fairies) are the best in that kind I have ever made, but somehow ‘The Treasure and the Law’ (*Puck of Pook’s Hill*) always struck me as too heavy for its frame.”
opposed to the “Whig interpretation of history, in which England progresses, with stately inevitability” toward the imperial sovereignty of its future.\(^\text{26}\)

Thematically, the stories of *Puck of Pook’s Hill* elucidate the many problems inherent in militant conquest and imperial occupation. The two narratives that dominate the book—the story of the Norman conquest and its aftermath and the story of the last days of Roman occupation in Britain—depict the early and latter days of an imperial campaign, focusing on the tension and ideological disillusionment that accompany such political configurations. Nevertheless, critics like John McBratney cite the *Puck* books as modified iterations of Kipling’s imperial program, as narratives that attempt to assuage Britain’s national despondency in the wake of the brutal, divisive Boer War.\(^\text{27}\) McBratney argues that the *Puck* stories do not make their author an apostate imperialist, but rather a more globalized imperialist who wishes to remind his readers of the importance of their own “hybridity” in conceptualizing a diverse empire of the future: “At a time when England seemed bereft of its traditional sense of community, a deep appreciation of intermixture in former times might lead to future integration and strength.”\(^\text{28}\) However, on closer reading, one can discern that Kipling’s text says something remarkably different. For instance, despite his high-minded talk about an England free of Norman and Saxon racial differences, the Norman baron De Aquila cannot wholly suppress the note of irony that underlies his idealistic statements. He may “‘think for England,’” as he claims, but his allegedly patriotic defense of its southern coast—which just happens to coincide with his own lands of Pevensey—against an invasion from Normandy appears as ludicrous hypocrisy coming from one who arrived by that

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\(^\text{26}\) See note 23 above.

\(^\text{27}\) See John McBratney, “The Puck Books,” 139. McBratney takes up an opposing argument to Peter Keating’s, who suggests that Kipling’s collection of poems *The Five Nations* (1903) marked the end of his unreserved endorsement of empire. McBratney claims that the *Puck* books simply emphasize a different method for improving Britain’s imperial project: “For all [the *Puck books’] lack, in Keating’s phrase, of ‘stirring exhortations to world-wide exploration and dedication to imperial ideals,’ they continue Kipling’s commitment to the idea of hybridity as the mainstay of a powerful empire.”

very road less than fifty years earlier (PH 106). Examples like this point to a sustained ironic subtext in the stories, which reveals a cycle of invasion and entrenchment that runs through all of England’s history, including its imperial operations in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Rahere the jester reminds his listeners of this unpleasant fact at the end of Rewards and Fairies. When King Henry I accuses Harold of breaking his famous oath and attempting to take England “by the strong hand,” Rahere’s bitterly sarcastic reply indicates that such is the way England has always changed hands: “‘Oh! Là! Là!’ Rahere rolled up his eyes like a girl. ‘That ever England should be taken by the strong hand!’” (RF 259).

Incredibly, critical readers of Kipling’s novels and poems habitually equate isolated sentiments of his dominant characters with his evolving political or ideological stance, a practice which becomes dangerously reductive and even obfuscating in interpreting the work of such a complex writer. In Kipling’s case, such an investigative practice adds little to the discourse on his work, but rather confirms Althusser’s principle of “concrete subjects,” wherein readers never move beyond the “rituals of ideological recognition” to discover the broader commentary on history and political dominance that permeates Kipling’s stories. For instance, an assumption of Kipling’s unqualified advocacy of imperialism seems ludicrous in light of the Roman

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29 See Andrew Lycett, 381-2. Lycett quotes from an uncollected letter that Kipling wrote in response to George Wyndham’s praise for Puck of Pook’s Hill, in which correspondence he admits to utilizing some of the themes of Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-1789) in his book and to drawing some inadvertent modern correlations: “While admitting that Gibbon was ‘the fat heifer I plowed with,’ Rudyard replied elusively, ‘I swear I didn’t mean to write parables—much—but when situations are so ludicrously, or terribly, parallel, what can one do?’”

30 See Peter Havholm, “Introduction: Guilty Pleasures,” in Politics and Awe in Rudyard Kipling’s Fiction (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 1-18, 4: “In addition, all of these critics [T. S. Eliot, Boris Ford, George Orwell, C. S. Lewis, Bonamy Dobrée, John Lyon, John Coates, and Daniel Karlin] assume a relevant connection of agency between author and achieved work: ‘Kipling’ for them is both an ‘author function’ (in that the name often stands for a reception history) and an Englishman who lived in India, the United States, and England, and wrote some thirty-six volumes of fiction, poetry, and prose. That is, the texts we investigate are created by the man Rudyard Kipling, whose life experience helps to explain the particular forms his fictions take.”

31 See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Literary Theory: An Anthology, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 294-304, 300: “The writing I am currently executing and the reading you are currently performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the ‘obviousness’ with which the ‘truth’ or ‘error’ of my reflections may impose itself on you.”
Pertinax’s comments on the bleakness of his situation on Hadrian’s Wall: “‘We’re the last sweepings of the Empire—the men without hope. Myself, I’d sooner trust condemned criminals’” (PH 143). Conversely, one cannot overlook the same character’s subsequent expression of undaunted loyalty to the Empire he serves: “‘In War it is as it is in Love,’ said Pertinax. ‘Whether she be good or bad, one gives one’s best once, to one only. That given, there remains no second worth giving or taking’” (PH 163). Kipling’s narratives are decidedly not unilateral treatises on the glories of empire, nor are they uniformly subversive deconstructions of imperialist dogma. These are merely two expressions of his work, the two dialectical antipodes that delineate the boundaries of his narratives’ historical cycles, their “eternal return.”

However, Kipling’s historical cycles ultimately denote more than the transience of ideology and its political implementation: they also ruthlessly undermine the notion of social (or collective) progress for a unified people or nation. Although several commentators have acknowledged the presence of cyclical patterning in the Puck books, few have been willing to ascribe its purpose to anything more universal than Kipling’s desire to foster “the time sense” in his audience. As Kipling describes it, this unorthodox sense of history deliberately abandons generational succession as a historical model, thereby dismissing both the Burkean notion of ancestral inheritance and the Carlylean “History of Great Men” supposition that had dominated Victorian historical thinking. In place of these exploded notions of history, Kipling wants to substitute “a notion of the time sense which is at the bottom of all knowledge of history and

32 See Peter Hinchcliffe, “Coming to Terms with Kipling: Puck of Pook’s Hill, Rewards and Fairies, and the Shape of Kipling’s Imagination,” University of Toronto Quarterly 45 (1975): 75-90, 4-5. Hinchcliffe compares these fundamentally contradictory or incoherent elements of Kipling’s fiction, as well as ambiguous terms like “the Law,” to the mathematical designation for an irrational number known as a “surd” due to their resistance to systematic analysis: “Many of Kipling’s ideas and the images in which they are embodied are truly irrational, almost in the way that some numbers are irrational. They are the literary equivalent of surds, like the square root of minus one. Kipling’s readers are constantly confronted by terms that are obviously of crucial importance to Kipling himself but which resist any attempt at analysis.”
history rightly understood [sic] means love of one’s fellow men and the lands one lives in.”

Many critics, including John McBratney and Stephen Prickett, read this admission as yet another indication of Kipling’s need to establish a sense of belonging based on specific geographic and racial commonalities. McBratney affirms that “Kipling’s aim” in the Puck books is to impart to his audience the feeling of “belonging to a nation,” and Prickett describes the abiding purpose of the books as an attempt to define what it means “to be English,” to understand the essentialist, collective “mind . . . of the English as a whole—made to come alive in the stories of the people of Sussex where Kipling had come to live.” In contrast to these and other similar interpolations of Kipling’s authorial purpose, I contend that, whatever his intentions, Kipling’s narratives present an England devoid of any coherent essentialism like “Englishness.” Instead, the England of the Puck stories is a somewhat loose affiliation of disparate peoples who strive to make the best of “the lands one lives in,” wherever those lands might be. It is important to remember that many of the characters in these stories are cosmopolitan travelers or immigrants, and they share their laudable qualities with characters from Kipling’s other works who hail from countries all over the globe. As Kipling famously quipped in a letter to Charles Norton soon after he and his family moved into Bateman’s in Sussex, he viewed England as “the most marvellous of all foreign countries that [he had] ever been in.” Moreover, Kipling knew very little about the details of English history before he began his research for the Puck books; in fact, he admits to having “discovered England” upon moving to Bateman’s. Thus, the contention that Kipling planned to use the Puck books to establish a firm sense of provincial “Englishness” for his readers seems problematic. Arguably, Kipling’s project propounds the universal qualities of

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compassion, loyalty, and courage, regardless of nationality, creed, or race, and Puck’s representative “Englishness” comes to represent the most noble and enduring aspects of collective humanity.

Beginning in “Weland’s Sword,” Kipling systematically deconstructs the fin de siècle Christian British Imperial consciousness, revealing an England replete with “heathen” and Christian gods, whose followers are frequently apathetic or disingenuous in their faith. And as several commentators have pointed out, though they tend to focus more on Rewards and Fairies than on Puck of Pook’s Hill, Kipling is not overly kind to the Christians in developing his comparison. Sandra Kemp, for example, argues that the whole of Kipling’s literary corpus contains an ongoing critique of mainstream Christianity: “From Plain Tales of the Hills to Rewards and Fairies, his stories question nineteenth-century Evangelical Christianity, and challenge the proselytizing, education, and philanthropic motives of Church Missions.”37 More recently, Lisa A. F. Lewis has suggested that, beneath their ostensible endorsement of Christian principles, the stories of Rewards and Fairies, particularly “The Conversion of St. Wilfrid,” evince Kipling’s distrust in the offices of the established Christian Church: “The church as institution is not necessarily a good influence.”38

Indeed, when Puck finds the discarded god Weland shoeing horses by the roadside as local legend “Wayland-Smith,” he witnesses the ungrateful hypocrisy of a Christian farmer, who enjoys the god’s services without payment or even acknowledgment. Puck punishes the man by driving his horse in circles, signifying the unbroken cycle of irreverence that led to Weland’s demythologization at the hands of his ungrateful worshippers. When Hugh the Saxon, serving as novice in a local monastery, hears the man’s shouts, he accuses the farmer of refusing “Wayland-

37 Sandra Kemp, Kipling’s Hidden Narratives, 85.
Smith” his well-deserved thanks for shoeing the man’s horse, but the Christian farmer haughtily replies that such gratitude is out of place: “No,’ said the farmer; ‘Wayland-Smith’s a heathen’” (PH 55). Although Hugh compels the farmer (with Puck’s invisible assistance) to thank Weland, Hugh is the one to wish the god well and release him from his humiliating exile, an act that also marks an end to his cursory attempt to become a monk. The Abbot of Hugh’s monastery admits that the Saxon novice “will never be a monk,” suggesting that Hugh’s potential for heroic action transcends the ascetic life, and then places the tools of Weland’s forge upon the altar of his church. Through this symbolic act, the Abbot exemplifies the ecumenicalism of Kipling’s England rather than emphasizing its Christian roots. In Kipling’s narratives of the past, the Catholic monks of eleventh-century Sussex recognize the virtues of honesty and integrity in the pagan gods that they work to dispel as myth; in fact, their respect is such that they willingly place heathen relics alongside their most sacred religious objects: “‘We will hang up the Smith’s tools before the Altar,’ he said, ‘because, whatever the Smith of the Gods may have been in the old days, we know that he worked honestly for his living and made gifts to Mother Church’” (PH 57). These monks have resolutely decided to worship hard work and generosity, regardless of its source.

Likewise, the stories of Puck of Pook’s Hill repeatedly question the notion of “the British” as an exclusive, homogenous people, an Anglo-Norman race of only limited hybridity perfectly suited to rule the lesser peoples of the world. Rather, “the British” of these stories include the Saxons, Normans, Danes, Picts, Jews, and Romans—everyone who had ever set foot on the islands was, it seems, British by default. However, in Kipling’s narratives, qualifying for British status has nothing to do with race or ethnicity and everything to do with attitude and
personal virtue. Indeed, in 1902—two years before he began work on *Puck of Pook’s Hill*—Kipling wrote a scathing poem entitled “The Islanders” criticizing what he saw as the willful insularity of England’s provincial aristocracy. In the poem, he dismisses claims to racial superiority and divine right of place as “strong delusion,” reminding the complacent English that their precarious political dominance is anything but divinely ordained: “Ancient, effortless, ordered, cycle on cycle set, / Life so long untroubled, that ye who inherit forget / It was not made with the mountains, it is not one with the deep. / Men, not gods, devised it. Men, not gods, must keep.” In addition to its censure of the indolent “Islanders,” the poem makes use of Kipling’s cycles of history—“cycle on cycle set”—here rebuking England’s inheritors for failing to see the inevitable attack to which their own past has pointed.

One of Kipling’s many biographers, Andrew Lycett, has commented on the “strong argument for racial tolerance” that dominates his work from the turn of the century. Such tolerance can be seen most evidently in the stories about Parnesius, the Picts, and the “Winged Hats,” signifying either Saxon pirates or Scandinavian Vikings. Interestingly, Parnesius mistakes Una for a Pict when they first meet, as she has unwittingly hurled a projectile in his direction with her sling; nevertheless, the mistake implies an unavoidable connection between the Edwardian daughter of the local gentry and the blue-skinned “barbarians” of North Britain. Rather than presenting himself as thoroughly Roman, Parnesius’s ethnicity is also liminal and

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39 See Bonamy Dobrée, “The ‘Reactionary’,” in *Rudyard Kipling: Realist and Fabulist* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 112-125, 123. Although Dobrée is discussing Kipling’s frustrations with democracy, he notes the singular admiration that Kipling’s works inevitably reserve for individuals at the expense of any larger group: “Whatever Kipling’s attitude may seem to have been in respect of current ideologies—a word he would have detested—it must be clear that he was always strongly bent towards manifestations of individuality, not of self-expression in the commonly accepted use of the term, but in the doing of things, in the carrying out of work, or in the making of objects. . . . The person, the common person, God’s people who were good enough for him, not The People, was what concerned him.”


41 See Andrew Lycett, 380: “More unexpectedly (again not unlike *Kim*), Rudyard presented a strong argument for racial tolerance [in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*]. English history is shown as a process of gradual assimilation.”
ambiguous: when Una asks him whether he’s a Roman, he hesitantly replies, “‘Ye-es and no. I’m one of a good few thousands who have never seen Rome except in a picture. My people have lived at Vectis [the Isle of Wight] for generations’” (PH 120). Similarly, he avows that his nurse was not a “Romaness,” but a “Numidian,” and his governess was a Greek. There is very little of Rome about Parnesius the Roman, and Kipling seems at great pains to stress the cultural diversity of the ancient Britain that surrounds him. Upon visiting “Aquae Sulis,” the third-century Bath, Parnesius revels in the cosmopolitanism of the city, which mingles people from all over the Empire in an image intended to highlight the many obvious correlations with post-Victorian Britain:

“Aquae Sulis,” he repeated, “the best baths in Britain. Just as good, I’m told, as Rome. All the old gluttons sit in hot water, and talk scandal and politics. And the Generals come through the streets with their guards behind them; and the magistrates come in their chairs with their stiff guards behind them; and you meet fortune-tellers, and goldsmiths, and merchants, and philosophers, and feather-sellers, and ultra-Roman Britons, and ultra-British Romans, and tame tribesmen pretending to be civilized, and Jew lecturers, and—oh, everybody interesting.” (PH 122)

Ancient Bath is here presented as a city not unlike the London of the early twentieth century, with its “old gluttons” lounging in bath houses while endless processions of military and governmental pomp paraded by in the streets. In an instance of admirable subtlety, Kipling introduces “tame tribesmen” into the mix, trusting his readers will remember that these are the Britons and Celts, “pretending to be civilized” after the manner of their Roman protectors. Additionally, the citizens of the province of Britannia contain a variety of deliberately mixed types, the “ultra-Roman Britons” and “ultra-British Romans,” whose pronounced
multiculturalism disputes any popular notion of Imperial self-containment or racial purity. In another example of Kipling’s historical irony, Parnesius goes so far as to admit he “was not too fond of anything Roman” because of the “Roman-born” officials’ prejudiced attitudes toward “British-born” citizens of the Empire: “‘The Roman-born officers and magistrates looked down on us British-born as though we were barbarians’” (PH 124). Kipling’s readers could hardly miss the striking parallels to their own historical situation, wherein those born in the Empire’s hub shunned or unfairly stereotyped those born on the frontiers of England’s vast dominions (like Kipling himself). Repeatedly, the touting of racial superiority receives universal censure in the *Puck* books. 42

In addition to the book’s overall destabilization of Britain’s racial heritage, the stories in *Puck of Pook’s Hill* tenaciously denounce the assumption of uncontested, or secure, imperialism. Perhaps more than any other writer of his time—with the possible exception of Joseph Conrad—Kipling explored the isolated fragility and ideological entropy of political states in his work, from global empires to village councils. 43 Accordingly, he presents the situations of political or military control that fill England’s past as temporary and hazardous. For instance, *During Sir

42 See also “A British-Roman Song,” in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, 132. In this frame poem that follows Parnesius’s first tale, an unknown speaker urges Rome to remain strong on behalf of its outlying provinces, since it represents “that so-holy spot . . . Crowned by all Time, all Art, all Might” where the Imperial “Race began.” With an unquestionably dark irony, Kipling dates the poem “A.D. 406,” the year before Constantine III began the extraction of Rome’s armies from Britannia, and four years before Alaric the Visigoth’s sac of Rome and the Empire’s speedy collapse.

43 See John McClure, “Unbearable Burdens,” in *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 30-55, 31, 40. In describing Kipling’s body of work during the 1880s and afterwards, McClure suggests that one of its most striking consistencies is anxiety and madness over the perception of an imminent social or political upheaval: “Within these enclaves [imperial retreats like Simla in northern India] existence is a matter of stale diversions and buried anxiety, while outside range the allied threats of disease, insurrection, and insanity. . . . Indeed, Kipling’s descriptions of madness during this period [the 1880s] often involve the breakthrough of sinister forces from a realm of outer darkness.” See also William B. Dillingham, “Within the City of Dreadful Night,” in *Rudyard Kipling: Hell and Heroism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 1-44, 17. Dillingham argues that Kipling’s fiction often vehemently attacks British complacency and haughtiness, resorting to images of hellish punishment for those who choose not to see the danger on all sides, such as those presented in his diatribe against British cultural presumption entitled “The Bride’s Progress” (1888): “Presumptuous and shallow, an affluent young British bride from whose eyes ‘the untamable arrogance of wealth looked out’ is the object of Kipling’s scorn in the story. . . . Though she walks within a city of dreadful night, observing sordid and gruesome sights, she seems almost impervious to the unspeakable horrors ‘gathered round her’ . . . .”

200
Richard Dalynbridge’s “occupation” of Hugh the Saxon’s manor, the Norman knight learns over and again by how narrow a margin he remains in control of the “Saxon hornets’ nest” (*PH* 67). Out of a chivalric sense of honor to Hugh’s sister Ælueva, Sir Richard camps outside the manor house, amongst the Saxon men that he naïvely believes “began not to hate [him]” (*PH* 69). However, when De Aquila returns to the manor after King William’s coronation, he informs the deluded knight that Hugh’s presence has been the only thing preventing his Saxon servants from murdering him in his sleep: “‘Fool!’ said De Aquila. ‘[Hugh sleeps in your hut] because his Saxons have begged him to rise against thee, and to sweep every Norman out of the valley. . . . Therefore Hugh hath made himself an hostage for thy life, well knowing that if any harm befell thee from his Saxons thy Normans would slay him without remedy’” (*PH* 72). Thus, the uneasy truce that Sir Richard believes his paternalism has established with the Saxons is a complete fiction. The lives of everyone in the valley, Saxon and Norman alike, depend upon the courageous loyalty of one man. Similarly, during Maximus’s visit to Parnesius’s outpost in “On the Great Wall,” the aspiring emperor moves through dangerous surroundings with a determined oblivion on more than one occasion, yet Kipling never fails to remind his readers of the hubris that Maximus’s stoic resolve truly signifies. After he meets with Parnesius and Pertinax, Maximus sets off alone for his ship, with “‘Picts, scores of them, each side of him, hidden behind stones’” (*PH* 147). Later, during Maximus’s address to the Roman garrison *en masse*, Parnesius notes the fine line that separates imperial control from lawlessness in a series of apt analogies:

“The garrison beat round him—clamouring, clowning, asking for pay, for change of quarters, for anything that came into their wild heads. That chair was like a little boat among waves, dipping and falling, but always rising again after one had shut the eyes.” Parnesius shivered. . . . “If he had turned his back an instant, or for an instant had ceased
to hold their eyes, there would have been another Emperor made on the Wall that hour.”

(PH 150)

Parnesius compares the puissance of Maximus’s authority to a bobbing ship, and the image evokes a dialectic of power that hovers on the cusp of a wave or sinks into a watery trough; the idea is enough to make Parnesius shiver at the mere memory of the scene. He then likens the Roman soldiers to “wolves in a cage,” barking and nipping at their “trainer” with thoughts of barely concealed malice in “their wild heads.” And when he asks Puck for corroboration of his account, the wise “Old Thing” responds with yet another affirmation of history’s cyclical organization: “‘So it was. So it always will be,’ said Puck” (PH 151).

Significantly, though it is the Romans (specifically Theodosius the Great), and not the Picts, who finally end Maximus’s aggressive campaign, Kipling follows his final Roman story with a brief poem entitled “A Pict’s Song” to further emphasize the ever-present dangers of imperial occupation: “Rome never looks where she treads . . . / And we gather behind them in hordes, / And plot to reconquer the Wall . . . / We are the Little Folk—w-e! / Too little to love or to hate. / Leave us alone and you’ll see / How we can drag down the Great!” (PH 165). Thus, Rome’s cruel ignorance, its tendency to crush its conquered peoples beneath an indifferent bootheel, shall lead to its eventual downfall at the hands of the “Little Folk”—who are, it must be remembered, among the Celtic ancestors of modern Britons. However, as the poem portrays them, the Picts hardly come across as the nobly oppressed and virtuous downtrodden masses. In the poem, the speaker likens the Picts to malicious parasites and other pests: they are “Mistletoe killing an oak – / Rats gnawing cables in two,” and “Moths making holes in a cloak,” which comparison implies that the self-inclusive speaker realizes the tawdriness of his own people’s
conniving and insidious enterprise. Arguably, Kipling makes a double statement here: first, the British imperial model, fashioned closely after that of the Romans, too often results in the vindictiveness and brutal retaliation of its subjects; second, the British themselves are descended from manipulative, petty predecessors who took great pleasure in destroying the work of others. Here again, Kipling affirms the indomitable cycles of history, wherein the civilizations of the “Great” shall perennially dissolve due to both external and internal corrosives.

Moreover, Kipling’s narratives demonstrate how treachery, sedition, and blackmail are self-replicating practices, which taint even their ostensibly “heroic” characters with unsettling compromise. In perhaps the most obvious example of moral relativism in the collection, De Aquila discovers that his scribe, the spy Gilbert, has been sending secret messages to his rival, the Baron Fulke, concerning his allegedly treasonous comments about King Henry. De Aquila knows that Fulke desires to turn the King against him in order to obtain his lands in Pevensey and then hand over the rule of England to Robert, Duke of Normandy. All of this plotting and scheming for lands and status, as De Aquila affirms, constitutes an “old” method, so old that it seems hardly worth outrage or censure: “. . . and our King is so beset by his brother and his Barons (small blame, too!) that he is mad with mistrust. Fulke has his ear, and pours poison into it. Presently the King gives him my land and yours. This is old,’ and he leaned back and yawned” (PH 105). Then, in a decision that even Dan and Una find confusingly distasteful, De Aquila devises a plan to adopt Gilbert’s subversive pen for his own purposes, kidnapping and torturing Fulke into revealing the whole of his sordid past and then blackmailing him with its written record: “‘I am but fighting for life and lands with a pen, as thou hast shown me, Fulke’”

See John Coates, “Failure and Success of Civilizations in Puck of Pook’s Hill,” in The Day’s Work: Kipling and the Idea of Sacrifice (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 37-46, 44: “‘The Picts, ‘the worm in the wood,’ ‘Moths making holes in a cloak,’ the conquered but irreconcilable weak, are not attractive. Timid, treacherous resentment seldom is. Nevertheless, they are understandable, and Kipling has done them imaginative justice. They are a permanent problem to the imperial system that bears down on them; one that, constituted as it is, it cannot solve.’”
Instead of rebuking Fulke for his duplicity, De Aquila merely asks him to choose a side, England or Normandy, announcing his indifference as to which side Fulke’s choice might be. And instead of punishing his unfaithful servant for his disloyalty, De Aquila allows Gilbert to continue on in his service unchecked: “‘De Aquila said that he would sooner a clerk, however false, that knew the Manor-roll than a fool, however true, that must be taught his work afresh’” (PH 112-3). In this instance, justice makes way for extreme pragmatism, and England is “saved” using the same tools of extortion, espionage, and blackmail that its enemies employed against it. Indeed, Una’s troubled response to the “Old Men at Pevensey” and their morally dubious machinations could be interpreted as a summation of the doubt inherent in the whole of the collection: “‘I don’t understand,’ said Una. ‘But I think it was simply awful’” (PH 112).

One final example may perhaps serve as a definitive illustration of Puck of Pook’s Hill’s destabilization of the progressive or linear developmental model of British history so commonly associated with Kipling’s work. The final story in the book, “The Treasure and the Law,” relates the accidental events leading to the formation of England’s most sacrosanct political document, the Magna Carta (1215). Yet in Kipling’s account, the impetus for one of its most revolutionarily democratic elements, the Fortieth Chapter’s great promise of legal rights to all regardless of their status as slaves or free men, comes from the mind of an immigrant Jew, through the implementation of a bribe: “‘What terms?’ said Puck, quickly. ‘The Fortieth of the Great Charter says: “To none will we sell, refuse, or deny right or justice.”’ ‘True, but the Barons had written first: To no free man. It cost me two hundred broad pieces of gold to change those narrow words’” (PH 204). Thus, the document itself and one of its most egalitarian clauses came about, not as the result of the people rising in revolution or because of the noble actions of sagacious aristocrats, but because one righteous Jew followed his faith and knew how to manipulate the
Simultaneously, Kipling uses Kadmiel as the voice of warning for the more complacent members of his British Imperial audience at times, reminding them that the fortunes of the world are fickle and that the great power of the Empire rests primarily on gold—a substance that slips through the collective fingers of entire peoples with restless perpetuity: “‘There can be no war without gold, and we Jews know how the earth’s gold moves with the seasons, and the crops and the winds; circling and looping and rising and sinking away like a river—a wonderful underground river. How should the foolish Kings know that while they fight and steal and kill?’” (PH 200-1). Power and dignity matter very little in this conceptualization of global politics, in which no discernibly “progressive” pattern can be perceived. Only chance remains constant, and it is to chance that Kipling ascribes the formation of England’s great Parliamentary Law.

“But otherwise I perceive no change”: Demythologizing the Past in Rewards and Fairies

Critics and commentators have long pointed to the Victorian period as perhaps the first historical era to become self-aware, or as Richard Altick opines, “the Victorian period was the first in English history to be christened while it was still in progress.” Shaken by the social ramifications of the Industrial and French Revolutions, nineteenth-century Britons also confronted paradigm shifts in science and technology, along with the disintegration of long-held tenets in orthodox theology and moral philosophy. Such radical transformations, when coupled

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45 See Kipling, “The Treasure and the Law,” in Puck of Pook’s Hill, 197-209, 200. Kadmiel the Jew receives a prophecy at birth that suggests he is the one destined to bring the Law into England: “‘It was prophesied of me at my birth that I should be a Lawgiver to a People of a strange speech and a hard language.’”
46 See Lisa Lewis, “‘References,’ ‘Cross-References,’ and Notions of History,” 197: “Although, as Kadmiel shows in “The Treasure and the Law,” without gold a regime is powerless, neither armies nor treasure can ensure freedom; since England was at the height of her wealth and power when the book first appeared, this was something that needed saying.”
with an unprecedented dissemination of information about the past, resulted in what Hilary Fraser calls a “recalibration of human time itself,” whereby the temporally traumatized Victorians could come to terms with “a radical discontinuity between past and present.”48 This “recalibration” often involved an intense need to establish order in the elongated chronology of Lyell’s geological epochs and the apparently chaotic generations of Darwin’s “Man.” Not surprisingly, this order, spurious as it frequently was, transcended probability, reforming the legends of famous men and events to suit its hegemonic agenda. Thus, Carlyle admonishes his readers in 1843 with the virtuous example of “Jocelinus de Brakelonda, a natural-born Englishman,” whose thirteenth-century “wise simplicity” offers the key to England’s contemporary salvation.49 As Richard Altick affirms in his introduction to Past and Present, Carlyle’s rhetorical method dictates the interpretation of Jocelin and his time period that he privileges in his essays: “[Carlyle’s] aim therefore was to reveal the year in and of which he wrote as the result of a long historical process, of which the building of factories in Manchester and the erection of barricades in the Paris streets had been but the most recent major symbolic events.”50 Similarly, in an 1867 address, J. S. Mill advocates the perusal of historical accounts as a means to acquire inspiration for the indispensable process of self-betterment, lumping history’s men and women together with “characters” from “fiction”: “. . . [we learn] to sustain ourselves by the ideal sympathy of the great characters in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an idealized posterity.”51 With a little imagination and a lax view toward authenticity, these “great characters” can assume the status of “noble objects” for the

48 Hilary Fraser, “Writing the Past,” 110.
50 Richard D. Altick, introduction to Past and Present, v-xviii, xiv.
disillusioned modern; they can encourage and discipline the individual in the midst of the bewildering present.\textsuperscript{52}

In \textit{Rewards and Fairies}, however, published at the height of Britain’s complacent Edwardian golden age, less than four years before the onset of World War I, Kipling seems at pains to dismiss any such comforting or educational view of the noble past. In fact, the past ceases even to be noble: its actors are arrogant, manipulative, ineffectual, ignorant, or hypocritical, and their occasionally heroic actions frequently stem from the happenstance of situation rather than any inherent virtue or quality of character. In dispelling exaggerated rumors concerning the vaunted figures of England’s past, Kipling disavows the Victorian supposition concerning history’s potentially rehabilitative effect on the future, which disavowal reiterates the impossibility of comprehensive human progress by insisting on history’s non-linear revolutions.

After all, if people are fundamentally the same in “all times, in all places,” as Ralph Springett affirms in “The Wrong Thing,” then they will be capable of the same laudable achievements and the same heinous atrocities at every point in history. Such historical equality precludes the very idea of teleology, of long-term progress or regress: instead, it insists on repetition and recognition for its organizational schema.\textsuperscript{53}

\footnote{See Andrew H. Miller, “Resisting, Conspiring, Completing: An Introduction,” in \textit{The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1-32, 8: “For all its emphasis on one’s flight from the immediate surroundings, Mill’s picture is in its dry and studied way an optimistic one, assuming as it does that we have noble objects which can call out our moral capacities, that there is indeed a best self to be discovered.”}

\footnote{See Buckley, “The Eternal Now,” in \textit{The Triumph of Time}, 137-153, 137. Kipling’s \textit{Puck} stories attempt to liberate the reader from the power and pressure of time, to relieve those who live in a state of chronological hyperawareness of their overdependence on the past and their fear of posterity. As I see it, they do so through the conventional method of appealing to the child’s notion of an everlasting present, a notion markedly bereft of the larger sense of historicity that forces its adherents to accept a hierarchical or teleological view of time. Kipling’s major innovation was to utilize actual personages and events from history, however modified, as the content of his episodes rather than substitute fictitious characters and other worlds in place of reality. In doing so, he satisfies what Buckley calls “the desire for transcendence” without replacing actual history with pure fantasy: “Aware always of temporal relations and responsibilities, no adult can contrive or decree the release from time that the child habitually enjoys. Yet the desire for transcendence remains, and the dream of eternity may often prove not Miss Havisham’s delusion but an enriching vision.”}
Accordingly, the stories in *Rewards and Fairies* feature the ineluctable foibles of human nature, some of which lead to very dark, unpleasant results, but they do so filtered through the lens of Puck’s indomitable high-humor—the knowing wink of one who has seen it all and knows he’ll see it all again. The book’s opening story, “Cold Iron,” begins with the promise of hope for change—the fairy “People of the Hills” attempt to raise a human child as future ambassador to the increasingly hostile “folk in housen”—but ends with the collapse of those hopes in an instance of dark fatalism. The book’s dramatic approximation of Queen Elizabeth I in “Gloriana” makes her appear rash and cruel, overly concerned with her status as queen and bored or annoyed with her subjects, and its characterizations of Washington and Napoleon, two of the most unrestrainedly mythologized figures in history, reimagine the two legends as a political pariah and a petulant child, respectively. In “The Conversion of St. Wilfrid,” one of England’s best-known early missionaries discovers the virtues of the pagan faith through a moment of weakness in his own, drawing strength from the pagan chieftain Meon’s devotion to his heathen gods, but Meon and his people convert to Christianity anyway. Repeatedly, Kipling’s stories rend and slash historical pomp and dignity, revealing the typically vulgar truth beneath “all earth’s vanities,” as Harry Dawe’s story about his encounter with King Henry VII dispels the solemnity of knighthood and the monarchy (*RF* 100). Burdened with implications of futility or frustrated hope, these stories also contain obvious intimations of fidelity and self-sacrifice—as practically all of their commentators have noted—but Corinne McCutchan’s assertion that

54 See Kipling, “Hal o’ the Draft,” in *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, 178. The “high-humor” to which I refer allows Hal (Sir Harry Dawe) to laugh off the treason and sedition of his countrymen by ascribing their weapons smuggling to the timeless character of Sussex, implying that the mindset predisposed to such activities is an eternally recurring feature of the locale’s history. Upon discovering the cannon smuggling in St. Barnabas’ Church, Hal exposes the perpetrators through a series of pranks and secures his commission to renovate the church. When one of the guilty party first hears the refurbished bell ringing in the tower where the illegal guns were stored, his reply reveals the characteristic Sussex stoicism: “‘The old man pinches the bell-rope in one hand and scratches his neck with t’other. Sooner she was pulling yon clapper than my neck,’ he says. That was all! That was Sussex—seely [happy] Sussex for everlastin!’ . . . ‘Ah, Sussex! Silly Sussex for everlastin’,’ murmured Hal.”

208
“[Kipling] does not vary in his idealistic attitude toward [his characters] and their tales” goes too far. As I demonstrate, Kipling’s supposed “idealism” gives way to something more like dark modernism in these tales, a “bleak vision” of duty performed and loyalty upheld for nothing, for exploded ideals and hollow leaders, whose foolishness knows no historical bounds.

Touted as everything from the cipher for interpreting the “iron motif” in Rewards and Fairies to Kipling’s long-awaited contribution to Christian allegory, “Cold Iron” provides the collection’s most troubling commentary on the demands of destiny, the inescapable bonds of one’s lot in life, but it also completes a longer narrative of comparison between fairies and the English begun during Puck’s first encounter with Dan and Una. This comparison establishes a dichotomy between the sagacious “People of the Hills,” who understand time’s inevitable cycles, and the capriciously discontent “folk in housen,” who consistently destroy the work of their forbears and live in a state of perpetual strife. Beginning in the first tale of Puck of Pook’s Hill, Puck makes it clear that he is the last of the vanished “People of the Hills,” and Una alludes to Richard Corbet’s “The Fairies’ Farewell” (1647) as the verse that dispelled her belief in Puck’s kind. Indeed, the title Rewards and Fairies is taken from Corbet’s poem, which offers an ironic lamentation for the disappearance of the fairy folk: “Farewell, rewards and fairies, / Good housewives now may say; / For now foul sluts in dairies / Do fare as well as they, / And though they sweep their hearths no less / Than maids were wont to do, / Yet who of late for cleanliness /

[Corinne McCutchan, “Puck & Co.,” 76.]

[See Fred Inglis, “Girl or boy: home and away,” 161-2. Inglis outlines the dark core of Kipling’s Roman stories about manly resolve and self-sacrificial fidelity to one’s masters: “[Parnesius and Pertinax] love their autocratic master, whose puszch has failed, for his calm decisiveness, his knowing, shrewd eye for men, his laughing, ironic commitment to power, his absolute efficiency in discharging debts of honour, his good losing right up to the sweep of the executioner’s sword. Beyond love for their master, they have nothing to do but their duty. It’s a bleak vision . . . You get things done by nods and winks and tricks and craftiness, and you laugh till the tears run down brown cheeks and great shoulders shake, but all you can do is your job, and your job is your duty.” See also Peter Hinchcliffe, “Coming to Terms with Kipling,” 83-4. Hinchcliffe insists that Kipling’s cycles of history stem from his fundamental conviction that “folly is the permanent condition of mankind,” and that heroism, such as it is, “consists in carrying the fools’ burdens and trying to protect them from the consequences of their folly.” For Kipling, such heroism is, nevertheless, “ultimately futile.”]
Finds sixpence in her shoe?" The old “reward” for a clean house, proffered by the fairies to dutiful, efficient “housewives,” has disappeared, suggesting a modern lack of recognition that even the commonest virtue once garnered for its humble practitioner. Conventional morals have waned; now, the notoriously promiscuous milkmaids receive as much honor as the woman of the house. The implication here is that the loss of the “People of the Hills” signifies a corresponding irreverence and coarse materialism in the British people, which can only prove to be bad for England in the long term.

Whether driven away by King Henry VIII’s sixteenth-century dissolution of the Catholic monasteries and abbeys or by the subsequent narrow-minded prudery of the “Puritans” and their ilk, the fairies enact their exodus from England as a last resort in “Dymchurch Flit,” having had enough of the religious persecutions and other genocidal tendencies of their adopted country: “‘Some folk in England held with [King Henry VIII]; but some they saw it different, an’ it ended in ’em takin’ sides an’ burnin’ each other no bounds, accordin’ which side was top, time bein’. That tarrified the Pharisees [fairies]: for Good-will among Flesh an’ Blood is meat an’ drink to ’em, an’ ill-will is poison’” (PH 187-8). Ironically, the “Pharisees” are the long-minded people, given to calm deliberation and moderation, whereas the conditions of Reformation England reflect mainly violent radicalism. Thus, Kipling presents the “People of the Hills” as reasonable, “long-lived,” tolerant types, to whom any sort of protracted political upheaval is anathema.58 Their final abandonment of England serves as a censure of its petty polemics, and this implicit critique reappears in “Cold Iron.”

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58 See Kipling, “Weland’s Sword,” in Puck of Pook’s Hill, 47. During his introduction to the children, Puck chooses to describe himself as “fairly long-lived” rather than “old,” which may serve as an indication of his characteristic open-mindedness. “Long-lived” gives the impression of a wealth of knowledge and experience, while “old” can carry connotations of intractability or rigid conservatism.
Kipling gives us an earlier view of the fairy folk in “Cold Iron”: Sir Huon of Bordeaux and Lady Esclairmonde, the king and queen of the “People of the Hills,” still believe in the potential for improvement in the “folk in housen,” and they decide to act on this conviction by kidnapping a human slave and raising him as one of their own kind, with Puck as his personal tutor. In the frame story in which Puck reunites with Dan and Una, Cold Iron adopts an ominous, unpleasant connotation via the nails in the children’s boots. No longer allowed to run about barefooted during the summer, Dan and Una have started wearing restrictive boots that separate them from the earth, making their feet appear sickly and malformed: “‘Look at my feet—they’re all pale white, and my toes are squdged together awfully.’” Puck’s response is characteristically elusive, though it forecasts the somber lesson of his subsequent tale: “‘Yes—boots make a difference.’ Puck wriggled his brown, square, hairy foot, and cropped a dandelion flower between the big toe and the next” (RF 54). The dexterity and flexibility of Puck’s naturalism has begun to ebb in the children; moreover, the disconnection from the soil signified by the wearing of boots, particularly in summer, resonates in a book where the earth itself is of such importance—Puck’s first act on meeting the children is to give them “seizin,” or symbolic possession, of England by cutting out “a piece of turf” and handing it to them (PH 48). To prove his point about the “difference” made by Cold Iron, Puck asks the children if they would like to give up their boots for good, and Una admits that she would rather not: “‘No-o. I suppose I shouldn’t—not for always. I’m growing up, you know,’ said Una” (RF 56). Cold Iron, therefore, represents inevitability, the unbreakable chains of human destiny that cannot be resisted indefinitely, but must be accepted with heroic resolve. As Puck says, “‘folk in housen . . . must be ruled by Cold Iron . . . . their fortune’s made or spoilt by Cold Iron in some shape or other. That’s how it goes with Flesh and Blood, and one can’t prevent it’” (RF 56). Thus Puck begins
his tale about the slave-boy born “on the far side of Cold Iron,” whose ultimate decision to
accept a life of servitude completes the iron circle that governs his future.

Many critics have approached “Cold Iron” as Kipling’s treatise on the personal sacrifices
associated with the establishment of order or law, something like a children’s version of “The
White Man’s Burden” (1899). John Coates, for example, contends that the story deals with “the
nature of a sacrifice, whether literally through death, a physical pain or, metaphorically, a
surrender of the personality, which is the price paid to establish order, law, or civilization.”59
However, as I read it, the text supports no such solemn endorsement of painful self-abnegation,
but rather laments the narrow-mindedness of a people willing to isolate themselves from the
natural world—and from human compassion. In “Cold Iron,” the orphaned slave-boy’s eventual
subservience accomplishes no great law or principle of civilization in either the short-term or the
longer narrative; instead, his acceptance of the ring of servitude reads like a Greek tragedy in the
strictest sense, as the regrettable but unavoidable loss of innocence and potential blindly enacted
by his own hand. To begin his uncomfortably candid tale, Kipling paints an accurate picture of
the British slave trade. He describes the heavy iron rings worn around the necks of the slaves in
careful detail, foreshadowing the import of such a ring in the boy’s future: “‘[The slaves wore] a
ring of Cold Iron, four fingers wide, and a thumb thick, just like a quoit, but with a snap to it for
to snap round the slave’s neck.’” Puck then links the instruments of oppression with the local
Forge that stands on Dan and Una’s Sussex land: “‘They used to do a big trade in slave-rings at
the Forge here, and ship them to all parts of Old England, packed in oak sawdust.’” Dan and Una
are the inheritors of more than the site of noble adventures and brotherly meetings; their land
contributed to the inhuman slave trade, and Puck does not spare them the ugly particulars of its

59 John Coates, “Rewards and Fairies: Thor and Tyr, Necessary Suffering, and the Battle against Disorder,” in The
Day’s Work, 47-61, 49.
practice. The heartless “farmer out of the Weald” shuns the baby boy attached to his new purchase because “‘he didn’t want any encumbrances to her driving his beasts home for him.’” Likewise, the female slave disowns the infant, claiming, “‘It’s none o’ my baby. . . . I took it off a woman in our gang who died on Terrible Down yesterday’” (RF 58). The unwanted child thus comes into the family of the fairy folk, where he receives a comprehensive education in the workings of his human neighbors, but almost immediately his destiny is literally forged by the gods, specifically the Norse god of thunder and craftsmanship, “Asa Thor.”

For all the fairy rulers’ high-minded intentions, the boy’s future is determined the moment he leaves his own kind to dwell with the “People of the Hills,” which demonstrates Kipling’s almost fatalist historical vision in this story. Like the pervasive symbol of the heavy iron ring, the boy is shackled to his fate, which begins and ends in the embrace of Cold Iron. Despite the potentially symbolic overtones, his lessons with Puck amount to very little; his guardians’ plans for the reformation of “folk in housen” come to naught; and his life remands to the existence of a common slave.\(^6\) Overshadowing his concluding comments about the boy’s future family and moral quality, Puck chooses to emphasize the abject pointlessness of the slave’s life among the unfeeling “folk in housen”: “‘Never will he be his own master, nor yet ever any man’s. He will get half he gives, and give twice what he gets, till his life’s last breath; and if he lays aside his load before he draws that last breath, all his work will go for naught’” (RF 66). The conditions of his servitude remain constant in Puck’s vision: nothing will change in

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\(^6\) See Kipling, “Cold Iron,” in Rewards and Fairies, 68-9. See also Roger Lewis, Rewards and Fairies, 270-1 n. 6. Much of the critical confusion over the religious allegorical elements of the corresponding story stems from this poem, which makes a direct allusion to Christ’s crucifixion as an example of Cold Iron’s mastery over men. However, rather than venerating the metal as harbinger of technology and progress, “Cold Iron” focuses on the metal’s symbolic role as a tool of oppression or imprisonment. The iron of the poem appears as artillery for cannon and as chains and bars for incarceration, before it serves its climactic purpose in the nails of the crucifixion. At best, the material functions as a necessary evil in the poem, an obstacle to be overcome through the miracle of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. Given its ominous connotations in the story and the poem, it seems debatable to declare iron, as Roger Lewis does, “Kipling’s favorite material” that “makes for a new kind of magic—science and engineering—enabling the existence of the trains and machines he was so fond of.”
the boy’s life or in the lives of those he serves. The ever-present threat of futility, of insignificance, of working all one’s life “for naught” dominates the cycle of oppression Puck outlines, and from the tone of Puck’s admonition, one gets the sense that even futility is a fixed part of the pattern. Significantly, Puck utters this pronouncement like a prophecy, telling Lady Esclairmonde that he cannot effect change in the rigid cyclical system he mentions; he can only describe it: “‘Tell I can, but teach I cannot,’ [Puck] said” (RF 66). Due to his haphazard, nighttime stumble upon a piece of Cold Iron forged years before, the boy’s future is sealed, as are the futures of almost every major character in Rewards and Fairies. Through a combination of fateful accidents and the seemingly compulsory actions of individuals who see no alternative to their fates—like pieces on a “crazy chessboard”—Kipling presents his cyclical history of England, complete with dishonor, isolation, moral compromise, and bitter absurdity, all of which further contribute to the book’s demythologization of the nation’s past.61

Arguably, no story captures the last of these elements more adroitly than “The Wrong Thing,” the subversive tale of Sir Harry Dawe’s accidental knighting. At least one critic has noted some autobiographical significance in the story, though it conventionally receives less notice than the other tales in the collection.62 Indeed, “The Wrong Thing” sets the thematic precedent for a series of tales in which foolish people glorify a triviality in lieu of its more important counterpart or relapse into mysticism when confronted with innovation. In these tales,

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61 See John McBratney, “The Puck Books,” 156. As have numerous other readers, McBratney notes the thematic resonance of Kipling’s keynote phrase in Rewards and Fairies, “What else could I have done?” Contrary to the critical majority, McBratney does not wholly subsume the tension this phrase evinces beneath Kipling’s supposedly constant advocacy of mindless duty and self-sacrifice: “These moral and psychological aspects resolve themselves into a single question posed in almost every tale: ‘What else could I have done?’ . . . . The terrible fatality implied by this question makes these stories sadder and more inward—and less imperial—in their outlook than those of Puck of Pook’s Hill.”

62 See Lisa A. F. Lewis, “‘References’, ‘Cross-References’, and Notions of History,” 205: “A trace of autobiography has further been noticed in the stories ‘Cold Iron,’ in which an imaginative boy is bound to a life of humdrum service to others, and ‘The Wrong Thing,’ where a knighthood is bestowed on a craftsman, not for his best work, but for an inferior piece that has saved the government money.”
Kipling reveals the cycles of history to be the result of perpetual misunderstanding stemming from a universal foolishness endemic to human nature. In “The Knife and the Naked Chalk,” for example, the introduction of iron into a Neolithic tribe prevents the man who brings it from living a normal life, as his people see him as a god and refuse to associate with him on the old terms. Thus the people fail to respect the technology that has rid their village of the wolves and focus instead on the myth of its progenitor, choosing to believe that the creation of the iron knife must be “the work of a God” (RF 136). The same situation occurs in “Marklake Witches,” albeit with a slightly different misunderstanding on the part of the people. The story involves an improbable meeting between René Laënnec—the French physician who invented the stethoscope—and a local “white wizard” named Jerry Gamm, who “cures people by herbs and charms” (RF 111). The two unlikely colleagues work in tandem to fine-tune their invention, only to have it reviled as “the devil’s ear-piece” by the ignorant people of the town. And in “A Doctor of Medicine,” it is the narrator, Nick Culpepper, who operates under the delusions of superstition, believing himself to have cured a town in central England of the plague by means of astrological divination. In fact, his derivation that the rats of the town should be destroyed comes from his interpretation of the setting of Mars and only corresponds to the facts of epidemiological science by pure chance. As in Puck of Pook’s Hill, Kipling’s stories in Rewards and Fairies present these impediments to consistent progress or development as perennial, as fundamental flaws in the human condition. Confronted with yet another iteration of “What else could I have done?” in “The Knife and the Naked Chalk,” Puck responds with his characteristic world-weariness, implying that he has seen it all before: “‘It is a very old tale,’ Puck answered. ‘I have heard the like of it not only on the Naked Chalk, but also among the Trees—under Oak, and Ash, and Thorn’” (RF 139). The concluding arboreal list implies the tale’s universality.

63 See Peter Hinchcliffe, “Coming to Terms with Kipling,” 84. See also note 56 above.
throughout England and its entire history, as these three trees are the oldest living things in the country besides Puck, and they serve as apocalyptic symbols for its beginning and end: “‘I came into England with Oak, Ash, and Thorn, and when Oak, Ash, and Thorn are gone I shall go too’” (PH 47).

Like the Greek king Sisyphus, Kipling’s workers often toil in vain, fated to see their work misunderstood or denigrated by those least qualified to evaluate it. Moreover, the obverse side of this theme of futility typically involves a scathing critique of superficial pomp and public acclaim, which critique appears in “The Wrong Thing.” This story simultaneously delineates the empty promise of artistic immortality and shatters the egotism of public recognition through the commuting of awards or titles. The fallacy with these goals, as the story intimates, is their reliance on any long-term permanence or remembrance in human history, which offers no long-term endurance to artifacts, personalities, or even nations. Old buildings are torn down and new ones built on their foundations. Awards and titles are forgotten or transferred to new individuals. Simply put, Kipling’s stories insist the old adage that nothing lasts forever is inescapably, unrelentingly true. In the tradition of Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818)—and Kipling’s own poem “The Palace” (1902)—“The Wrong Thing” continues the critical trend begun in Rewards and Fairies in “Gloriana,” wherein the Machiavellian politics and unpleasant narcissism of the revered Queen Bess are revealed with ruthless candor.64 These tales denounce the hollow vanity

64 See Alfred Noyes, “Alfred Noyes on ‘Kipling the Mystic,’” in Kipling: The Critical Heritage, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 298-301, 300. Published in the November issue of the Bookman in 1906, Noyes’s review of Puck of Pook’s Hill remains one of the more insightful contemporary evaluations of the book. Noyes alludes to Kipling’s poem “The Palace,” whose theme of perennial decay and reconstruction he uses as an analog for Kipling’s investigation of the roots of British imperialism: “In his last book of poems [The Five Nations (1903)] there was one of great pathos called ‘The Palace’, which describes how a Master Builder cleared him ground for a house such as a king should build, and how—under the silt—he came on the wreck of another palace built by a forgotten king. . . . In Puck of Pook’s Hill we suspect that Mr. Kipling has for the first time dug through the silt of modern Imperialism. He has gone back to the old ground-works and seen the inscription upon them.” Although Noyes’s final comments in the review suggest his implicit progressivism, his evocation of “The Palace”—with its concluding line of “After me cometh a Builder. Tell him, I, too, have known,” which anticipates another cycle of destruction and rebuilding—accurately conveys the presentation of history set forth in the Puck books.
of major historical figures and practices, calling attention to the superficiality of history’s more spectacular players. For example, during the Queen’s account of how she analyzed the import of King Philip II’s letter and planned her response, she performs an elaborate, courtly dance that belies her feverish machinations: “[Queen Elizabeth] raised her head—the masked head that seemed to have nothing to do with the busy feet—and stared straight at the children. ‘I think this is rather creepy,’ said Una with a shiver. ‘I wish she’d stop’” (RF 79). The startling disconnect between the Janusian “masked head” and its perpetually “busy feet” causes Una to recoil from the genteel monarch.

Just as the children see the ugly side of Elizabethan pageantry, Harry Dawe learns the true value of knighthood and artistic legacy in “The Wrong Thing,” due to the request of one of King Henry VII’s courtly coterie. While working feverishly on King Henry’s elaborate chapel and tomb, where he hones his craftsmanship in iron and plaster, Dawe draws up a design for some scrollwork for a “pleasure ship” commissioned for “Catherine of Castile.” Realizing too late that the design is “rank bad,” Dawe has an impromptu audience with the King, during which he convinces the sovereign that his scrollwork would never survive the harsh conditions of extensive sea travel, thereby saving King Henry the high cost of gold plating needed to complete the project. In return, the King makes Dawe a knight “with three-quarters of a rusty sword” he had “found behind the hangings” in a dingy little room. Following this unorthodox ceremony, Dawe has an epiphany, a vision of history that reduces the work of his life, the symbols of his nation, and all its institutions of honor to the antics of a silly puppet-show:

“It came over me, in a bitter wave like, that here was I, a master craftsman, who had worked no bounds, soul or body, to make the King’s tomb and chapel a triumph and a glory for all time; and here, d’ye see, I was made knight, not for anything I’d slaved
over, or given my heart and guts to, but expressly because I’d saved him thirty pounds
and a tongue-lashing from Catherine of Castile—she that had asked for the ship.” (RF 99)
The wide pageant of history is laid bare: “triumphs” and “glories” do not last “for all time.”
Legitimate artistic talents—not to mention the assiduity and determination of one’s “heart and
guts”—often fail to secure what sheer dumb luck and narrow pragmatism can bring to pass.
Moreover, Dawe’s realization comes in the form of “a bitter wave” that gives way to sardonic
laughter, laughter at “the mad high humour” of an indifferent history, a “crazy chessboard” on
which the players move in unpredictable, yet somehow familiar, patterns:

“I thought of my own silly pride and foolish expectations that some day he’d honour me
as a master craftsman. I thought of the broken-tipped sword he’d found behind the
hangings . . . . Then I remembered the solemn chapel roof and the bronzes about the
stately tomb he’d lie in, and—d’ye see?—the unreason of it all—the mad high humour of
it all—took hold on me till I sat me down on a dark stair-head in a passage, and laughed
till I could laugh no more. What else could I have done?” (RF 99-100)
Significantly, Dawe pauses to have his laugh “on a dark stair-head in a passage,” on a literal
precipice overlooking a dark and unfamiliar space. Dawe catches a glimpse here of the darkness
within Kurtz’s jungle and Lord Jim’s ocean, of the filth and decay beneath Eliot’s “Unreal City,”
of the universality at the heart of Gabriel’s snow-covered vision in Joyce’s “The Dead.” The
master craftsman laughs at the chaos of the universe, the “unreason” and “mad high humour” of
human existence, and he does so because there is no alternative but despair. Kipling’s historical
model provides no assurances of prosperity or even of remembrance; it merely predicts
reiterative cycles that privilege no individual and no epoch over another. Indeed, Kipling ends
“The Wrong Thing” with Ralph Springett’s 1874 version of Dawe’s story, wherein he labors
diligently on “blue-brick stables” that he considers to be his finest work, only to receive a tip for preventing his employer’s wife from building a “haw-haw” in the park: “‘He gave me ten pounds for savin’ him a hem of a deal o’ trouble at home. I reckon things are pretty much alike, all times, in all places’” (RF 102-3).

*Rewards and Fairies* thus turns a harsh light on Britain’s regal past, exposing its many instances of vanity, injustice, and indignity. More importantly, however, the book’s stories share a preoccupation with the vicissitudes of fate, organizing their collective histories in layered patterns that remain contingent on Kipling’s central idea of a cycling timeline. The iron-bringer in “The Knife and the Naked Chalk” experiences a form of ignorant prejudice and social isolation congruous with that which hinders the physicians’ work in “Marklake Witches.” The two young gallants of “Gloriana” consent to serve a Queen who uses them as unofficial tools in her international brawl with Spain, just as “Simple Simon” risks his life to outfit his friend Francis Drake’s damaged ship, even though that friend is a notorious pirate whose career overshadows his own. Admittedly, most, if not all, of these stories involve a sacrifice on behalf of England, but those sacrifices are not often repaid or even acknowledged. Instead, Kipling offers the grating censure of the British people, of cruel slave owners, superstitious townsfolk, fickle citizens, faithless followers, and spiteful rulers. These stories are a testament to those people who, like the boy in “Cold Iron,” give of themselves for an ungrateful, fundamentally invariable nation, a nation that, no matter what its current status on the field of history, remains stubbornly self-destructive and susceptible to dissolution through selfishness and folly.66

65 See Kipling, “The Very-Own House,” in *Something of Myself*, 111. Kipling admits to the interconnectedness of his stories, although the precise nature of their organizational scheme is left unsaid: “...I worked the material in three or four overlaid tints and textures, which might or might not reveal themselves according to the shifting light of sex, youth, and experience.”

66 See Kipling, “Working-Tools,” in *Something of Myself*, 119-136, 129-30. In detailing some confusion over the meaning of his poem “The Islanders,” Kipling recounts that he should have simply accepted the misinterpretation as a sign of man’s inherent foolishness, indicating as he does so that life—and by extension, history—is not made up of
In the frame poem that precedes “The Wrong Thing,” a two-part piece entitled “A Truthful Song,” Kipling imagines the meeting of an Egyptian pharaoh and some modern bricklayers and another meeting between Noah and a group of modern shipwrights. In both encounters, the striking revelation is not how far mankind has come since the days of ancient Egypt and the Great Flood, but rather how much the technology and methods have stayed the same: “I tell this tale, which is strictly true, / Just by way of convincing you / How very little since things were made / Things have altered in the building trade” (RF 86). In addition to curtailing the arrogance of modernity, the poem reminds its readers of the imperial power and worldwide destruction that the presence of these two men denotes, possibly suggesting that such conditions are of contemporary significance. The juxtaposition of history’s greatest civilization with its most legendary catastrophe can hardly be accidental. Whatever their thematic function, Noah and the pharaoh also evoke societies of moral corruption and abject slavery, just as the iron in “Cold Iron” signifies war and imprisonment, and these connotations do little to glorify the past. Time changes little, the poem affirms, but one thing remains absolutely constant, and that is the corruptibility and impermanence of empires and civilizations.

“I know not what I know!”: The Question of Development in The Jungle Books

Kipling’s well-known series of beast fables or fairy tales, known collectively as The Jungle Books, has received an abundance of critical attention since publication, most of it directed toward an increasingly sophisticated analysis of the Mowgli stories and their elusive concept of the Law of the Jungle. In one of the most thorough examinations of Kipling’s...
allegedly universal arbiter of justice and order, Shamsul Islam’s *Kipling’s ‘Law’* (1975), Islam gives us the following definition of the abstract notion’s thematic function in the tales: “In *The Jungle Books* the Law is presented as a principle of order that is essential for the establishment of an ideal social structure as well as for inner harmony on an individual level.”67 According to John Murray, this reading of the Law wrongly assumes an ethical basis for its precepts, forcing critics like Islam and Dobrée to fumble around looking for ways to excuse its elements of cruelty and indifference. In an argumentative move verging on classic historicism, Murray counters with the assertion that Kipling would have advocated a legal system divorced from ethical considerations, drawing on “his imperialist attitudes” and the legal theory of his time.68 Thus, Kipling’s Law apparently signifies everything from an altruistic code of the purest idealism to an example of the most amoral pragmatism.

Accordingly, the conventional readings of Mowgli’s progress under the tutelage of this protean Law of the Jungle are no less diverse. Michael Newton sets forth the most widely accepted reading of Mowgli’s development, suggesting a clean, linear advancement from uncivilized animal to fully assimilated humanity: “The story of Mowgli in *The Jungle Books* is of his progress away from the jungle, savagery, and his childish irresponsibility, and towards a tentative maturity, an acceptance of his place in the human world.”69 Similarly, Carole Scott insists that all of Kipling’s books for children, particularly *The Jungle Books*, provide an arduous, uncompromising set of guidelines meant to forge strong, manly adults out of the raw materials of youth: “The books teach the ways to achieve success and self-esteem in later life,

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68 See John Murray, “The Law of *The Jungle Books*,” *Children’s Literature* 20 (1992): 1-14, 3: “Though Kipling was no legal theorist, he was a child of his time in his imperialism, in his trust in practical science, observation, and experience, and in his distrust of metaphysics. It is not surprising that his concept of law shows practicality and lacks idealism; it is even less surprising, given his imperialist attitudes, that a theory of law that Wolfgang Friedmann says ‘enabled the rising national State to assert its authority undisturbed by juristic doubts’ should have appealed to him.”
creating a picture of manliness, courage, and obedience to a clearly enunciated code of behavior from which one may not deviate for any reason.”

More recently, U. C. Knoepflmacher has argued that Mowgli remains an unresolved contradiction in his narrative, a hybridized individual with a foot in both the jungle and the civilized world: “[Mowgli’s] feral training may have made him superior to superstitious villagers and his human brain has elevated him above those jungle creatures whose own superiority stemmed from their previous contact with humans. Yet his uniqueness also makes Mowgli a perennial outcast . . . .”

My own reading of Mowgli’s education under the Law falls somewhere closer to Knoepflmacher’s contention in favor of unresolved confusion, though I would argue that he ends his narrative in a position remarkably like the one from which he began. Mowgli certainly learns a great deal in the jungle, much of it pertaining to the principles of the Law of the Jungle, but he also conspicuously forgets or elides those principles in the pursuit of his own interests. Moreover, the beasts who comprise Mowgli’s tutors and guides present an ambivalent code of conduct in the Law of the Jungle itself, wherein bribery, prevarication, and contradiction are often the rule rather than the exception.

In accordance with his vision of history as an inevitable revolution of patterned cycles, Kipling presents Mowgli’s “progress” as one big circle, in which his eventual employment in the Government Forestry Service in “In the Rukh” (1892) signifies his manipulation of yet another mutable Law rather than his assimilation into imperial subjugation.

Additionally, the Law of the Jungle itself functions in The Jungle Books more like the law of England outlined in the

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71 See U. C. Knoepflmacher, “Kipling’s ‘Mixy’ Creatures,” Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 48, no. 4 (2008): 923-33, 927-28: “The wolf-nurtured toddler who will become emperor of the jungle discovers his hybridity to be more of a curse than an asset.”
72 Interestingly, “In the Rukh” is the first of the Mowgli stories to be written, included in the collection Many Inventions (1892), which predates the publication of the The Jungle Books by two years. The tale depicts Mowgli as an almost cynical adult who secures a wife and a government pension through the clever manipulation of a white forest ranger and his Muslim butler.
above epigraph from “The Tree of Justice”: “all law is outlaw” once the leadership undergoes a paradigm shift or the conditions of society experience some fundamental change (as in the severe drought of “How Fear Came”), and might makes right in the perennial violence of jungle life.\footnote{See note 1 above.}

The first of the Mowgli stories in terms of narrative sequence, “Mowgli’s Brothers,” begins with Kipling’s characteristic avowal of the dangerous “madness” that underlies the precarious institutions of order or civilization. In describing the unpredictable jackal, Tabaqui, Kipling inaugurates a leitmotif of mental instability that runs throughout The Jungle Books, from the jackal and his master Shere Khan to the Bandar-log in “Kaa’s Hunting,” the camels in “Her Majesty’s Servants,” the sleigh dogs in “Quiquern,” the dreaded dhole in “Red Dog,” and Mowgli himself in “Letting in the Jungle” and “The Spring Running.” In the second paragraph of the first story in the collection, Kipling relates the frightening consequences of Tabaqui’s seemingly unavoidable affliction of the “dewanee,” a condition so common they have given it a name:

But [the wolves of India] are afraid of him too, because Tabaqui, more than anyone else in the jungle, is apt to go mad, and then he forgets that he was ever afraid of anyone, and runs through the forest biting everything in his way. Even the tiger runs and hides when little Tabaqui goes mad, for madness is the most disgraceful thing that can overtake a wild creature. We call it hydrophobia, but they call it dewanee—the madness—and run.\footnote{Rudyard Kipling, “Mowgli’s Brothers,” in The Jungle Books, ed. W. W. Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1-21, 1. All subsequent citations will refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically.}

Fueled by an incessant state of privation, Tabaqui and his many textual counterparts serve as reminders of the destructive elements of history: plague, war, vengeance, starvation. Conventional mores break down in their wake, as these agents of destruction suffer no fear of retribution, and the resultant devastation is indiscriminate and complete. Additionally, the
breakdown seems to reflect poorly on the community as a whole: thus, “the tiger runs and hides” out of fear and shame, “for madness is the most disgraceful thing” that touches all citizens of the jungle, from the lowly jackal all the way up to the great elephant Hathi, Master of the Jungle. Nevertheless, the agents of chaos in the narrative often denote necessary change—not the gradual improvement of progressivism, but the regenerative death and disintegration associated with the autumn and winter seasons. As Kipling presents them, Tabaqui and his ilk are the servants of Siva, the Destroyer, the aspect of the Hindu trinity that brings balance to its creative and conservative forces of Brahma and Vishnu. Repeatedly, and as a matter of course, chaos and disorder threaten to destroy whatever tentative structures—actual and metaphysical—the beasts of the jungle or the people of its neighboring villages have managed to erect, and the same instability plagues Mowgli’s development or “education” under the Law.75

From the beginning of Mowgli’s life in the jungle, the presence of its governing Law is felt mostly through the violation or manipulation of its tenets rather than through the jungle people’s adherence to its principles. Indeed, the first direct reference to the Law of the Jungle in the text is Father Wolf’s complaint about its inability to control the whims of Shere Khan, the itinerant tiger: “‘He has no right!’ Father Wolf began angrily—‘By the Law of the Jungle he has no right to change his quarters without due warning’” (2). Similarly, when Father Wolf presents Mowgli before the Free People of the wolf pack, they refuse to accept him until Bagheera utilizes a loophole in the Law to gain favor with the wolves, promising to provide them with food if they will induct him into the pack (8-9). The Law can thus be easily ignored or bent to one’s purposes, which becomes even more obvious once Mowgli has intimidated Shere Khan

75 See Bonamy Dobrée, “The Framework of Living,” in *Rudyard Kipling: Realist and Fabulist*, 58-70, 63. Although he neglects to deduce the cyclic inevitability of Kipling’s motifs of destruction, madness, and chaos, Dobrée notes their presence in his work as potential models for viewing the history of civilization: “You abandon these rules or customs at your peril, since they are the basis of protective civilization, which is a very thin crust, as we living in this century know only too well.”
and earned the respect of the wolves by brandishing fire. He promptly uses this newfound power to usurp the Law, informing the Free People that their government is under his control: “‘What ye will do, and what ye will not do, is not yours to say. That matter is with me; and that we may see the matter more plainly, I, the man, have brought here a little of the Red Flower which ye, dogs, fear’” (18). Therefore, whenever someone of the jungle impedes Mowgli’s will, he steps into his role as “the man,” from which heightened state he can dictate his own Law, which he does by allowing the aging Akela to live once his strength has failed him during the hunt, a clear violation of the Law of the Jungle: “‘For the rest, Akela goes free to live as he pleases. Ye will not kill him, because that is not my will’” (19). The Law of the Jungle remains as strident or tenuous as Mowgli and the other exceptionally powerful or clever members of the jungle community wish it to be; it is little more than a figurehead invoked to justify the acts of those strong enough to enforce their hegemonic interpretation of its principles. 76

Mowgli’s education suffers several setbacks during his adventures among men and beasts, but none seems as explicitly recidivistic as his wanton destruction of the village of his birth. Taught to distrust the Seonee Wolf Pack that was his first community in the jungle, Mowgli experiences a correlative disillusionment with the inhabitants of the man village in “Tiger! Tiger!” After reuniting with his mother and settling in the village, Mowgli meets some children who mock him for his inability to play their games or speak their language, and Kipling’s narrator insists that Mowgli’s restraint stems from his adherence to and understanding of the Law: “Then the little children in the village made him angry. Luckily, the Law of the Jungle had taught him to keep his temper, for in the jungle life and food depend on keeping your

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76 See Kipling, “Kaa’s Hunting,” in The Jungle Books, 22-47, 22. There also exists a fair amount of provincialism in the jungle people’s adherence to the “Law of the Jungle.” The Free People of the wolf pack only subscribe to that portion of the “Law” that deals most directly with their kind: “The big, serious, old brown bear was delighted to have so quick a pupil, for the young wolves will only learn as much of the Law of the Jungle as applies to their own pack and tribe . . . .”
temper . . . only the knowledge that it was unsportsmanlike to kill naked cubs kept him from picking them up and breaking them in two” (51). Ironically, Mowgli will condemn the very same village to total decimation and its inhabitants to starvation or exile in “Letting in the Jungle,” and he will dismiss the conspicuous inconsistencies in his actions with childish remarks, such as, “Am I to give reason for all I choose to do?” (186).

In spite of all the beasts’ careful teaching of the noble Law—particularly the patient lessons of Bagheera the panther and Baloo the bear—Mowgli repeatedly demonstrates his contempt for its statutes, changing his mind and racial affiliations as suits his whims. For example, when Buldeo, the village hunter, tracks Mowgli and his wolf-brothers into the jungle, Akela refers to him as one of Mowgli’s “brethren,” causing the boy to rebuke him and lash out at him with a knife: “. . . speak of the Man-Pack and of Mowgli in two breaths—not one” (185). Moments later, he prevents the wolves from killing Buldeo, saying that “Man does not eat Man,” a contradiction that provokes Bagheera into equivocally berating the utter “foolishness” of man: “That is Man! There speaks Man! . . . . We of the Jungle know that Man is wisest of all. If we trusted our ears we should know that of all things he is most foolish” (186). Mowgli follows the Law of the Jungle when it behooves him to do so and abandons it when it does not; therefore, his alleged development under its guidance represents, not a cultivation of noble attributes and moral principles, but a heuristic in the dialectics of power. Poignantly, Kipling has Bagheera note the shift in power upon Mowgli’s declaration of racial superiority, not in a voice of willing

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77 See U. C. Knoepflmacher, “Kipling’s ‘Mixy’ Creatures,” 927. In comparing the violence of “Letting in the Jungle” with the self-sacrificial altruism of the story that immediately precedes it in the collection, namely “The Miracle of Purun Bhagat,” Knoepflmacher comments on Mowgli’s actions as direct foils for those of the gentle monk in the other tale—whose ascetic retreat into the Himalayan foothills represents a remarkable instance of anti-progressivism: “The contrast is poignant. Whereas the aged Purun, warned by the shy forest animals who try to nudge him toward safety, helps villagers to flee the mudslide that will destroy their dwellings, the teenage Mowgli commandeers an army of assorted jungle beasts to carry out his personal vendetta against the village they will obliterate. Purun’s resumption of the leadership he had abdicated thus clashes with the increasing aggressiveness of a power-intoxicated wolf-boy.”
submission, but in one of thwarted protest: “‘This comes of living with the Man-Pack,’ said Bagheera, slipping down after them. ‘There is more in the Jungle now than Jungle Law, Baloo’” (187). Thus, thanks to the juvenile caprice of man, lawlessness follows law, perennially reducing the community of the jungle to the status of the lowly Bandar-log, the monkeys of no creed, memory, or practical sense of social unity—monkeys who bear more than a passing resemblance to the Man-Pack.78

Essentially, Mowgli’s jungle education gradually breaks down, with interludes of ethical clarity, right up until his departure from the jungle community in “The Spring Running.” He fails to grasp the lesson of “The King’s Ankus,” naively choosing to blame himself for introducing the valuable object into the world of men rather than comprehending the fundamental flaw in human nature that led to so many deaths. Despite the stipulation of the Law of the Jungle that reads “kill not for the pleasure of killing” (166), Mowgli’s violent intolerance of the foreign or unfamiliar remains intact, growing even more intransigent in “Red Dog,” in which narrative he wages war on the dhole for no greater cause than spite and racial bigotry: “He despised and hated [the dhole] because they did not smell like the Free People, because they did not live in caves, and, above all, because they had hair between their toes while he and his friends were clean-footed” (282). In “The Spring Running,” Mowgli even loses patience with his four brother wolves, forgetting their legal liberty from his dominion during the “Time of New Talk” in the spring. The eldest of these, Gray Brother, points out the inconsistencies in Mowgli’s behavior, indicating that his decision to rejoin the Man-Pack is illogical but inevitable, a hallmark of the

78 See Kipling, “Tiger! Tiger!”, 48-66, 49, 52, 66. More than once, Mowgli and the narrator make direct and indirect comparisons between the “Men Folk” of the village and the disorganized, childish Bandar-log: “‘There have no manners, these Men Folk,’ said Mowgli to himself. ‘Only the gray ape would behave as they do.’ . . . . a circle that met every evening on a masonry platform under a great fig-tree. It was the village club, and the head-man and the watchman and the barber (who knew all the gossip of the village,) and old Buldeo, the village hunter . . . . met and smoked. The monkeys sat and talked in the upper branches . . . . The Man-Pack are angry. They throw stones and talk child’s talk.”
irrationality of human nature: “Thou, and not I, hast said that [the Man-Pack] are evil and senseless. Thou, and not I—I follow my own people—didst let in the Jungle upon them. Thou, and not I, didst make song against them more bitter even than our song against Red Dog” (320). Admitting to the disintegration of his development under the Law—“I know not what I know!”—Mowgli resolves to go back to his own kind, not as the result of his maturity or preparedness for civilization, but in accordance with the mandates of fate—much like the boy in “Cold Iron” returns to the society of “folk in housen”: “Man goes to Man at the last, though the Jungle does not cast him out” (321). This is where Mowgli’s tale ends in *The Jungle Books*, but his adult counterpart in “In the Rukh,” written and published three years before “The Spring Running,” brings his story full circle and reaffirms Kipling’s use of perennial narrative.

By beginning at the end of Mowgli’s fictional chronology, so to speak, Kipling creates an unavoidable destiny for his wolf-boy, one which prevents his character from making any legitimate progress by consigning him to the same status he possesses in the opening pages of “Tiger! Tiger!” Contrary to the popular critical reading of his adult character, I contend that the Mowgli of “In the Rukh” is a brash, sarcastic free agent, whose supposed subservience to Gisborne and the other officers of the British Government actually reflects his trenchant manipulation of their organizational system, much as the young Mowgli used the cattle of the Man-Pack to defeat Shere Khan years before. This reiterative narrative construction—along

79 See Kipling, “Tiger! Tiger!”, 64. Kipling obviously intended his earlier story “In the Rukh” to be included in the extended Mowgli narrative since he makes a direct reference to it at the end of “Tiger! Tiger!” and eventually chose to include it in the Outward Bound edition of *The Jungle Books* (1897): “But [Mowgli] was not always alone, because years afterward he became a man and married. But that is a story for grown-ups.”

80 For one example of the typical critical stance on Mowgli in “In the Rukh,” see Jane Hotchkiss, “The Jungle of Eden: Kipling, Wolf Boys, and the Colonial Imagination,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2001): 435-449, 441: “Amazingly, the ‘son of the forest’ winds up working for the forest service, becoming a cog in ‘the wheels of public service which turn under the Indian Government.’ He acknowledges readily that ‘It is the Sahib’s rukh’ and takes seriously Gisborne’s offer of ‘work for pay for the Government’. . . . In Mowgli, in fact, Kipling has created the ideal subaltern, the native without the ‘native problem,’ by engendering a new Indian race disturbingly divorced from Indian history, culture, and tradition.”
with its deliberately anachronistic ordering—further demonstrates Kipling’s anti-linear storytelling, which emphasizes cyclical patterns of repetition rather than progressive development.

To begin with, Kipling uses Mowgli to demonstrate how remarkably little control or understanding Gisborne and Muller—the officers of the “Department of Woods and Forests”—actually possess of the massive, untamable rukh (or “jungle”) entrusted to their care. Gisborne, the local Forest Officer in charge of the rukh in the story, fails to understand the methods Mowgli uses to maneuver its various animals according to his wishes, and Mowgli all but taunts him for his spurious authority over a jungle he so little comprehends. After drawing forth a “nilghai” bull from the wilderness to prove his abilities—an act with explicit echoes in his utilization of the village cattle in “Tiger! Tiger!”—Mowgli challenges the bewildered Gisborne with a sardonic reminder of his official capacity: “‘Does the Sahib believe now, or shall I bring up the herd to be counted? The Sahib is in charge of this rukh.’” 81 Later, when Gisborne attempts to force Mowgli to explain his abilities with an imperious command, Mowgli abandons him in the middle of the jungle, leaving him with a condescending comment about his superior knowledge of the wilderness. Significantly, Mowgli has again to deny Gisborne’s indirect accusations of preter- or supernaturalism—just as he must discount the rumors that he is a wizard in the village of his youth: “‘There is no devil-work in the matter at all. Only…I know the rukh as a man knows the cooking-place in his house.’ Mowgli was speaking as he would speak to an impatient child” (339). Likewise, Muller, “the gigantic German who was the head of the Woods and Forests of all India” (340), confesses upon meeting Mowgli to his relative ignorance of the

lands he governs: “‘Now I know dot, Bagan or Christian, I shall nefer know der inwardness of der rukh!’” (344).

Mowgli’s knowledge far surpasses that of his alleged superiors, which affords him a position of power not unlike his relationship with the animals of the jungle. Even the white men who preside over the governmental affairs of India refer to him as a god: “‘If Faunus does not know, who should know?’” (342). Although he does agree to work for the Department as a forest ranger, Mowgli does so on his own terms, virtually absconding with the daughter of Gisborne’s Muslim butler, Abdul Gafur, and coercing Gisborne and Gafur into approving their marriage through blackmail, and declaring an end to his obedience: “‘I hear.’ There was a murmur of two voices conferring among the leaves. ‘Also, we will obey—for the last time’” (348-9). Just as his obstinacy and arrogance have not diminished, Mowgli’s harsh, exploitative treatment of the animals has little changed since his boyhood among the Seonee Pack and his jungle tutors, when he drove even Hathi the elephant into a debasing fury to accomplish the destruction of the village that had slighted him. 82 Even Gisborne seems affronted by Mowgli’s inhumane handling of the “nilghai” bull during their first meeting: “The first idea in Gisborne’s bewildered mind was the indecency of thus dragging out for inspection the big blue bull of the rukh—the putting him through his paces in the night which should have been his own” (333). Rejected by the social institutions of both the human and animal worlds, Mowgli never truly “goes to Man at the last” or clings to the strength of “the Pack” in accordance with the Law of the Jungle. 83 Instead, he steals himself a bride, cleverly obtains the means to sustain himself and his family for life—the

82 See Kipling, “Letting in the Jungle,” 201. Challenging Hathi’s authority, Mowgli substitutes his own “Master-word” in order to accomplish his vendetta against the village that cast him out: “‘But, indeed, and truly, Little Brother, it is not—it is not seemly to say ‘Come,’ and ‘Go,’ to Hathi. Remember, he is the Master of the Jungle, and before the Man-Pack changed the look on thy face, he taught thee the Master-words of the Jungle.’ ‘That is all one. I have a Master-word for him now. Bid him come to Mowgli, the Frog . . . .’”

83 See Kipling, “The Law of the Jungle,” in The Jungle Books, 165-7, 165: “As the creeper that girdeth the tree-trunk, the Law runneth forward and back— / For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.”
Government position comes with a pension, after all—and retreets into the *rukh*, where his own children grow up in the company of wolves. Kipling’s Mowgli narrative thus ends where it began, with an arrogant, violent man-child ruling over his own private autocracy in the jungle. The education of the Law has accomplished little in amending his character, and his alleged assimilation into the culture of man—let alone the culture of imperial service—is a tenuous one at best.

In Kipling’s fictional universe, every aspect of human history, whether it be the individual trajectory of one boy’s education under the Law, or the convoluted occurrences, accidents, confluences, and destinies that comprise an entire nation’s past, reflect an irrepressible cycling of patterned events. Notable personalities “come round again, eternal as the seasons,” affecting surprisingly little during their span of temporal existence.84 Thus, like the seasons of the jungle, Mowgli’s life exhibits epochs of exuberance and epochs of destruction. His protection of Akela the wolf in “Mowgli’s Brothers” becomes the vicious knife-attack of “Letting in the Jungle,” only to revert back to solidarity during the Pack’s battle with the dhole in “Red Dog.” The Roman Empire becomes the Saxon invasion, which gives way in its turn to the Norman dynasty, and so on throughout time, each era producing equally remarkable people who display extraordinary courage, loyalty, and sacrifice, while others perennially demonstrate cowardice, betrayal, and extreme self-interest. No era can boast of superiority to another due to its chronological position, which means that, for Kipling, transpiration does not *ipso facto* equal progress, and history does not culminate in Britain’s glorious Empire. Similarly, the institutions

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84 See note 65 above.
of Law are only “as perfect as time and custom can make [them],” which, in Kipling’s view, is actually not perfect at all, but runs ever back upon itself like the “Giant Creeper” of the jungle.  

Fated to perennial reiteration, humanity’s efforts are forever undone only to be recommenced, but in the process they are often rendered silently futile like the stories Dan and Una hear before Puck removes their memories, or like the endeavors of Kipling’s “Fabulists” from the poem of the same name—a poem that appears before the short story “The Vortex” (1914) in the Sussex Edition of Kipling’s works. In the story, a progressive civil servant called Mr. Lingnam propounds numerous complicated schemes for the improvement of the Imperial Government over dinner with the narrator, but on the following day, his accidental collision with a delivery boy carrying bees on his bicycle transforms the local English village into an image of chaos. Disheartened by the event, Mr. Lingnam declines to further elaborate any plans for improvement. Implicating the British in their inability to maintain even basic order at home, the story and its accompanying poem also gently ridicule the concept of progress itself. In the perennially disintegrating chaos of the “instant,” or the “Vortex,” how can one make any progress? Rather, Kipling’s narratives indicate that one should simply do what one can to stem the tide, with the understanding that, inevitably, time and tide wait for no man, and history remembers precious little: “So it hath fallen, / as it was bound to fall, / We are not, nor we were not, heard at all.”

85 See Kipling, “How Fear Came,” in The Jungle Books, 149-167, 149, and see note 82 above. See also Kipling, “The Very-Own House,” in Something of Myself, 111. In a brief aside concerning his famous poem “If—,” Kipling notes his feelings on the human capacity for achieving the high qualifications the poem sets forth as prerequisites for manhood, suggesting that while they were “counsels of perfection most easy to give,” he regretted the poem’s popular use as the gold standard for behavior in the education of the suffering Young: “[The verses of “If—”] were drawn from [Dr. Leander S.] Jameson’s character, and contained counsels of perfection most easy to give. Once started, the mechanism of the age made them snowball themselves in a way that startled me. Schools, and places where they teach, took them for the suffering Young . . . .”
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