

Tales of Enchantment

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January 17-19, 2016

How old are fairy-tales? They are tales which have been orally transmitted since time immemorial. But how long is time immemorial? Collingwood brings up one example of a local tale which referred to a hill around which a ghost in golden armour was supposed to ride around at nights. In the 1830's the hill was excavated and a Bronze Age burial was discovered richly furnished including a bronze plate for a pony. Could we assume that tales have survived from the Bronze Age? Maybe even earlier? Why not? The Homeric epics go that far back, as much of the Bible, although the survival of the latter was abetted by the early invention of the script. The origins of Fairy tales could be subjected to a scientific study, and if so a historical one, and that is the purpose of Collingwoods extended text. It is held at a rather abstract level, more geared to laying down certain principles than to come up with hard indisputable facts, although not devoid of charming anecdotal asides. Clearly it was all written up for publication, but as his life was cut short, it remained among his *Nachlass* only to be recovered, edited and polished sixty years after his death, the original executioner - a certain Knox - supposedly rejecting it as of less interest. The text is written as an essay, or rather a succession of essays, on which the author with customary lucidity of prose and argument lays out the text with many a digressions going beyond the ostensibly narrow subject matter, touching on issues of general interests such as the difference between history and natural science, the supposed constancy of human nature, in particular what we share with so called primitive people, and finally the nature of civilization and its future prospects. All of them constituting pet topics of the author to which he repeatedly returns.

The study of fairy-tales is intimately connected with the larger topic of the essence of man and its historical development. In fact this is what gives its allure, the possibility of being able to look through a window into the mentalities of people of the past, and not surprisingly provides the motivation for the serious attention accorded them. The pioneers were the well-known brothers Grimm, sentimentally inspired by the Romantic reaction to study the ancient soul of the Germanic people. This was based on a misunderstanding of the notion of 'Volk', making an unwarranted extrapolation from close kinship to that of an entire population with a common cultural and linguistic context. In other words the notion of blood carried to an extreme. But those were the tenors of the times. The two brothers - Jacob (1785-63) and Wilhelm (1786-59) - who collected their stories *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* during more than forty years, were in fact linguists, and known not only for their grammar and dictionary of German, but perhaps even more so for the law of systematic changes in Germanic languages known by their name. Thus they were steeped in a German critical tradition, and as opposed to Perrault (1628-03) and his *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*, they did not elaborate upon the tales, but endeavored to stay as close as possible to the oral tradition (although any transcription of an oral tale inevitably becomes edited, and of course the Grimm touch did permeate the narrative style of fairy

tales ever since), thus allowing a more 'scientific' study. But a linguistic study only goes so far in illuminating the minds of our distant predecessors, in fact it is not clear how far back specific languages go, and how much change, and hence divergence, you may expect for a given extension of time.

The next approach is through anthropology, which in fact was not just limited to field-work but inspired an imaginative interpretation of stories, myth and religion, the most spectacular example being of the 'Golden Bough' by the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer (1854 - 41) in twelve volumes. A work which fired the contemporary imagination, as well as scandalized conventional pieties with his detached treatment of Christianity, as just one myth among many. In those volumes he firmly established the idea that mankind has gone through a development from magic through religion to the modern scientific outlook. In fact this attitude of inherent superiority has influenced much of modern anthropological work based on the assumption of the advantages of civilization. Although Collingwood admits that the approach is a definite advance from the romantic idea, after all it involves at least some empirical anchorage, he takes serious exception to this predominant notion of savagery.

Then there is the approach by the psychologists, notably Freud and Jung. This was written in the 30's, maybe during the heyday of psychoanalysis when it enjoyed maximal prestige. So as a consequence, although Collingwood is very suspicious of psychology (one would even say resentful), he writes very respectfully of Freud and his successful treatment of neurotics, which he attributes to a more scientific approach, but finds Freud's fanciful speculations as to Totem and Tabu pure phantasy with no relation to the facts on the ground, although he can appreciate the seductive appeal of the arguments. The story in fact is like an Adam and Eve concoction, in terms of having a definite beginning, from which the cultural development of mankind developed. But, as Collingwood remarks, history has no definite beginning, we can pursue it deeper and deeper into the past until we get lost for dearth of evidence on which to build. With Jung there is a further development of the attempts of Freud, and one which draws heavily on the tradition as exemplified by Frazer, but the author notes that rather than being an advance it is a regression. By rejecting the paramount importance of sex in Freudian theory and replacing it by a more general form of emotional energy, the theory loses in specificity and becomes more vapid (and in the terms of Popper, less falsifiable).

After having rejected the three approaches Collingwood, hardly surprisingly advocates the historical approach. He embarks on a digression on the difference between history and natural science. The latter thrives on simplification and hence generalization, and is, in the words of Collingwood, a spectacle on which we can gaze as outsiders; while history deals with specifics, resists simplification and hence allows no generalization. Thus the ambition of a historian elucidating the history of fairy-tales, or more generally, that of the development of human civilization, can never be as elegant and charming as the other approaches, on the other hand it will stick closer to truth. But for history to get a purchase, there has to be material to work on, and Collingwood thinks of it as an archeological project. In fact as a professional historian, as opposed to as a philosopher, archeology is his metier, and he gained a reputation as an expert of Roman inscriptions, a remarkably narrow specialty in view of his philosophical scope, but admittedly a very technical one and

thus no doubt congenial to his scientific persona. Hence sadly you cannot expect much of a historical illumination in the text, maybe if he had been allowed a more normal life-span he could have been able to expound more interestingly on the history of fairy-tales, in the present volume, he confines himself to a lengthy commentary on the extensive collection of Miss Marian Cox of fairy tales.

He notes that there are many variations of the same story from different parts of the world and time epochs. In his chapter he concentrates on the 'Cinderella' motive, to which he adds two sequels ('Catskin' and 'Cap o' Rushes'), and includes the story on which 'King Lear' is based. The basic question is whether stories have spread by diffusion or whether they have independent origins. He remarks that obviously both phenomena occur, and that it is not too easy to make a clear distinction, one blending into the other. From the psychological point of view one would emphasize the latter. Meaning that indeed fairy tales are expressions of psychological facts, and hence not cultural, for which diffusion would be more general. Although Collingwood rejects the psychological view as far too categorical, he will in the sequel tacitly accept much of it. But he points out that when certain specific details occur with minor variations, it is reasonable to assume that this is a case of borrowing, not independent creation. From the variations he concludes that the origin of most of our classical tales may come from India, and he also notes as an aside that northern Europe seems to have been much more susceptible to influences from the East than the southern Mediterranean part.

Now the issue of creation is a touchy matter. On one hand there is the romantic notion of fairy-tales stemming from time immemorial and having been handed down in an oral tradition more or less intact, they transmit invaluable information about the soul of a people. On the other hand there is a more dismissive notion of the fairy-tales being primitive concoction put together by inferior minds, and as such having very little to seriously contribute. Common to both is an assumption of an original creator, whether known or not, in some distant past.

First Collingwood challenges the assumption of intactness. Clearly it is unreasonable, if for no other reason than the existence of so many variations, to assume that diffusion does not modify a tale. Secondly he puts into question the existence of a sole author. An oral tradition is a tradition of performance. A good performer is in tune with his audience, thus there will always be changes to comply with the mood and implicit wishes of the listeners. A tale is not inscribed in stone, it is malleable, just as our memories are. Thus the creation of a story is not necessarily the work of one man, in fact it is a collective enterprise, and with fairy-tales one that goes on for generations. Thus there is some truth to the fact that a tale is a collective dream, if one does not take the word 'dream' too literally. Why are stories being told? They are so because they fulfill emotional needs. Collingwood is, as already noted, dismissive of psychology, but he takes emotions very seriously. Maybe he takes them too seriously to be satisfied with the explanations provided by psychologists, and their ambitions of being scientific in the manner of natural scientists? But man is not a spectacle, which we can study disinterestedly from the outside, as Collingwood never tires of reminding us. Thus tales are successful because they are in touch with the basic emotions of their audiences, for the simple reason that they have been shaped by them. As an aside, he points out that a trope of actors can, if exceptionally, produce a play by

themselves, they do not really need an author. Thus one wonders what he would have thought of the issue of Shakespeare's identity as an individual. Rather than involving yourself in the silly notion that the plays attributed to Shakespeare were not written by him, but by somebody calling himself Shakespeare; you can take the notion seriously that the plays did develop through a collective effort of actors making up plays which improved upon each performance, and that Shakespeare was only the man who collected them in the end and made the necessary editing for more or less final versions, for of course anything growing in a flux, will always remain in the flux, and had it not been for the conservation effected by the printed text, they may have evolved to this day. It is only through the printed version, Collingwood reminds us, that we have the notion of an authentic version, and anything else would be considered a corruption. This is in fact a strange idea in art, it does not really exist in science and mathematics, in which each contribution, be it printed, never enjoys the same rigidity of authenticity, but is always open to improvement.

The brunt of the authors argument does not really concern fairy-tales but the wider issue of the nature of the savage and that of civilization and in particular the modern one which is supposed to set us apart from them. The idea of the savage as primitive is deeply entrenched. The psychologists even compare him to the mentally deranged. He is supposed to be ignorant and superstitious, thus mentally immature, and often compared to a child, something which is not so surprising in view of the metaphor of the childhood of mankind. But the metaphor is misleading, primitive man, as far as that designation is appropriate, is not that different from modern man, as far as his mindset is concerned. This ties up with the invariance of human nature, something the author explicitly considers and rejects in his essay, although his whole conception of history, as the history of thought, relies on this basic assumption. It is thus interesting, not to say amusing, to identify similar ostensibly irrational traits in the life of modern man, just as it is interesting to become aware how many instinctive traits we humans have in common with animals. In fact one may speculate whether most of our actions are based on instinct as opposed to conscious intentional deliberation. The savage is supposed to have no conception of science, and that his beliefs rather than being based on rational considerations are merely superstitious and magic. Collingwood takes exception to this view, in fact primitive man was (and is, as far as primitive tribes still survive to this modern age) eminently rational, otherwise he would hardly have survived. When it comes to cultivating his crop, or fashion metals out of ores, or prepare his food, he is very scientific. True the body of knowledge may be severely limited compared to ours, but their attitudes, when practical life, and hence survival, was concerned had to be rational. In fact modern man has preserved many of so called primitive traits, such as the wearing of clothes and shoes. True clothes are protective in inclement climates, and do shield nudity and hence maintain dignity. In fact, it is the latter that is most important. The role of clothes in most climates serves the function of enhancing the status of the wearer, and this is still true today. Thus fashion is, if we want, an irrational phenomenon, which we share with our earliest ancestors. In particular this holds for shoes, which are notoriously uncomfortable, and can, like clothes, be dispensed with. Connected to fashion is the notion of taboo. If you are invited to a dinner with a dress-code you comply with it, not because it is legally enforced, or that you will get punished for it in any physical way, solely because of social pressure, which even if tacit,

can be so strong to compel you. You may think that this is fine, to adhere to a code, or to comply with a taboo, may be a very rational thing to do for an individual, but that begs the question, why this taboo in the first place? Are not taboos arbitrary and irrational? One may argue for the rational basis for sexual taboos, such as incest, or various dietary ones, after all, they do serve useful bases. But Collingwood points out that one would miss the point, would one emphasize rational reasons, which too often turn out to be nothing but rationalizations after the fact. Taboos are emotionally based, and while emotions may not be rational, this does not mean that they are irrational, after all they can very well be compatible with rational thinking as we have just seen, they are just different, and serve different needs. The reason that dress-codes have evolved is to serve an emotional need. This leads us into the issue of art.

Art for Collingwood is an expression of emotion, and this should be distinguished from magic, whose purpose is to generate emotion. Aesthetics plays a crucial role in art, as it pertains to the essence of expression, but it could very well be absent in magic, in fact more often than not, as it tends to interfere with its purpose. A war-dance has the purpose of preparing men for war by inducing in them the right emotion appropriate for combat. In particular it may generate something that is not there, as well as strengthening an already existent emotion. This is very different from expressing an emotion, that ideally leads to catharsis, and thus in a sense neutralizes the emotion, by changing it. The first is magic, the second is art. The first leads to action, the second obviates the need to act. A war-dance that would be an expression for a war-like emotion, would be a substitute for actual war, and thus as far as successful wars go, a disaster. One may in this context consider pornography. Is it art? If its purpose is to generate sexual excitement, as most of the commercial variety seems to be, it is not art but magic, according to the criteria of Collingwood. On the other hand if its purpose is to express sexual excitement, it is art after all, and in the process aesthetic considerations will usurp a larger and larger role. The excitement is there, it does not have to be engendered, but it has to be dealt with, to find an outlet for. The emotion provides the energy and the inspiration, but its expression channels it into other directions, and it is no longer the primary object of attention. Thus the anthropologist identifying the war-dance with magic, believes that it is a substitute for war, or at least that it will ensure victory. But the attitude of the 'savage' is not that different from modern man. He knows that a prerequisite for victory is to be in the right savage mood, and that is what the war-dance is meant to achieve. There is no magic to it, in the rational sense, he is under no illusion that the war-dance by itself would ensure victory. In a similar vein one should also consider other rituals of primitive societies, such as rain-dances. They do as little induce rain in a direct way, as a war-dance induces victory. Their purposes are emotional, just as the dress-codes, still prevalent in modern societies, are there to induce a special kind of mood appropriate to the occasion of celebration.

Another aspect of universal human emotion, which anthropologists have misunderstood as superstition, is the practice of hurting a person though hurting his nail clippings. Collingwood points out that between ourselves and what we have created there is a strong bond. Our creations belong to our extended self (which may associate to the notion of 'extended cognition' which has become rather fashionable lately). If someone accidentally, or even worse intentionally, destroy something you have made, be it a drawing, a letter, or

even any kind of trifle that has issued from your hand, you feel it as an affront, and whoever damages your possessions, damages you, because the notion of creation can be extended. Even if you have not made a certain item, you may through extended use have created a relation to it, making it become part of you ¹, thus a owner may become more and more attached to a piece of clothing the longer he has used it, even, or maybe especially, if it reduces to tatters, and has no longer any rational use. It may be possible that this is not as much true nowadays as it was a few generations back, as our civilization has become more and more materialistic, which does not necessarily mean attachment to individual material objects but a dependence upon material objects in general. Because what we are talking about are emotions, whose existence *qua* emotions, is as firmly grounded as anything. They may be irrational and not merely unrational, as in the case of useless clothing, but are felt as real, in fact emotions are the only thing we may directly feel as real. Thus if somebody wants to hurt you, or feel angry with you, he or she can vent that anger, not necessarily on you, but on something that belongs to you, something with which you have a bond, because that bond is not only perceived by you, but also by others through sympathy (meaning putting yourself imaginatively in the shoes of others, without necessarily implying approval). By attacking something that belongs to you, the attacker will receive the same kind of emotional satisfaction, had he or she attained by attacking you yourself in person. She or he may not be under the illusion, that she or he is thereby inflicting actual physical damage, this is secondary. Thus to attack the clipped fingernails is not a case of delusion, but a valid expression of hostility. And what more can you expect?

The problem is modern civilization. It is characterized by its emphasis on what he chooses to call utilitarianism. This means that something has value only if it has utility. Thus intrinsic value counts for less and less, one needs a rational reason to do something. Sports is good because it improves health, religion may have useful social consequences, and so on. Thus this need to justify emotions by asking for their rational underpinnings, something, incidentally, which is lately reflected in the fad of evolutionary psychology trying to find all kinds of more or less contrived reasons of reproductive advantage for present psychology. And this is the root of the anthropologist viewing the behavior of primitive people from an utilitarian angle. But utilitarianism is not an intrinsic human property, it is a cultural fad, emotions are natural and universal, and thus to understand things through them gives you a much better picture than to apply a foreign cultural prejudice. In particular the latter is responsible to view the rituals as pseudo-scientific. People were no fools in those days, they were able to make a distinction between emotions and physical reality, to distinguish between wishful thinking and hard facts. But, we still need to remind ourselves of it, without disparaging the importance of emotions. And once again Collingwood gives examples of everyday phenomena, such as wearing hats (now out of fashion) as to enhance power and dignity. In particular he explains what makes the wheel of modern civilization turn, namely the acquisition of more and more elaborate and powerful technical tools. One may think that it is the need that drives this, but in

¹ The author takes the example of the yacht of King George, a boat which upon his death was sunk, as it was felt as a sacrilege to offer it for sale, so intimately it was considered to be a part of him. Some aspects of this is also legally codified when it comes to parts of a body to be interred or cremated, you are not allowed to extract gold fillings in teeth as an example.

many cases what is paramount in the fundamental feeling of power that a new tool gives, irrespective of its practical utility. The results of using tools do not necessarily improve the lot of man, it may admittedly give him more leisure, but the real question is how he can really use and profit from this added leisure. The feeling of power needs some explaining. The new tool is an extension of yourself, but also something outside yourself, and the nature of the exhilaration you feel, is more complicated than just power itself, it has to do with the very acquisition of an external power and learning (which can be very quick indeed) to control and marshal that power. It is this emotion that drives us to invent and use new tools, not their ostensible utilities. Thus modern man, just as his savage predecessors, are steeped in what Collingwood calls magic, only that we are reluctant to admit it as such, as if we were afraid of it. In short we are far more like savages than we would think.

Finally he identifies three threats connected with modern mechanical civilization, in which Art (except as financial investment?) and Religion are looked upon with askance and suspicion. The first error, as he calls it, is the absurd hope, as he judges it, of merely becoming more and more scientific we will automatically reach greater heights in terms of wealth and happiness. The hope he compares with that of a man going blind and as a consequence acquiring bigger and bigger telescopes. The second error and threat is to exploit, suppress and eventually massacre other civilizations which are less scientific than ours. And thirdly to give up and accept its follies and savageries as inevitable. And all of those errors he lays at the feet of poor hapless Frazer and his attitude to savages and magic.

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