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## Oscar Wilde, Victorian Fairy Tales, and the Meanings of Atonement

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What the age needs is not a genius but a martyr.

(Søren Kierkegaard, 1813-1855)

But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character.

(Albert Schweitzer, 1875-1965)

In 1889 W. B. Yeats was invited to the Wildes's house at Chelsea. The young poet, whose *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) was reviewed that year by Wilde, was asked by Oscar to tell his son a fairy tale. Yeats got as far as "Once upon a time there was a giant," when the little boy ran screaming out of the room. "Wilde looked grave and I was plunged into the shame of clumsiness," the poet recalled in his autobiography (91). This act of storytelling seduction that backfired dramatizes how the verbal formulas of adults can pale before the authorial divinity of the very young. Even as they conjure ghosts of the punitive father, such sensitive listeners seem to determine the fate of adult words at their moment of utterance. As William Blake's *Songs* suggest, the literal-minded innocent can be a creative visionary as well. "Children are never earnest in the way that adults are," Dusiñberre states, which is why they became Wilde's most explosive weapon in attacking Victorian earnestness (261). The self-authorizing world of children, like the self-referential work of art, embodied Wilde's esthetic credo that "[i]t is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" (17) and that self-realization is the aim of life.

Yeats was mortified as a storyteller, but his fairy-tale incantation worked like a charm in making the hidden bogeys of childhood visible. **[End Page 336]** Like the inner tyrant of retributive justice, the terrors of a grown-up, a semi-divine monster moving on legs, is well-known to small children and their nightmares. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, an intellectual fascination with the irrational and unconscious mind catalyzed a variety of linguistic rituals, esoteric doctrines, and literary alchemies.

As Alex Owen has shown, the suggestive power of magic, like the supersensual, paranormal, and occult phenomena attractive to Wilde's circle, anticipated psychoanalysis as an avant garde mode of self-realization and the "inward-looking spirituality" of C. G. Jung. In 1892 Yeats, who like Wilde's wife was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Door, declared in a letter to John O'Leary that "[i]f I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word" (211). For Wilde, another verbal wizard, magic was not the art of covering things up but the act of embodying secrets of the self. Feminist criticism has examined the way women writers of the nineteenth century (Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Perkins Gilman) used Gothic elements to express subversive female feelings (rage, sexual desire, reproductive dread). Less attention has been paid to the way Victorian fairy tales blend sensual imagery, physical abandon, and corporeal suffering to explore the mysteries of atonement.

John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray, A. E. Housman, E. Nesbit, and Kenneth Grahame all wrote magical tales, just as Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, T. S. Eliot, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning invoked, in a variety of genres, the figure of Christ. But oral wonder tales by George MacDonald, Christina Rossetti, and Oscar Wilde recast the gendered and generational stereotypes of religious authority in the Victorian period. Unlike the lengthy German "liberal lives" of Jesus, which proliferated from scholarly presses of the 1860s, these works were brief and spoke directly to the need to find a new human Christ implicit in Mary Arnold Ward's enormously popular *Robert Elsmere* (1888). In the widespread speculation of Victorians about the personality and divinity of Jesus may be glimpsed tensions inherent in Christology since the pre-Nicene church regarding the problem of post-baptismal sin. Whether the body of Christ was conceived as the bestower of all divine good or the supreme sacrifice for our sins, opposing views of his efficacy developed early in church history and spawned competing, though sometimes overlapping, meanings of atonement: repentance as change of life or the work of penance.<sup>1</sup> 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 **[End Page 337]** their fantasy. Tapping realities that could not be approached through the logic of a sermon or a novel, archetypal fairy tales by these three writers revitalized Christianity with energies of the body suppressed in the dominant culture. In an immaterial space somewhere between Calvinism, Catholicism, and the Church of England, a Scots "stickit" minister without a pulpit, a woman poet who rejected the call of the cloister, and the Irish nephew of three clergymen who aspired to write "the Epic of the Cross" established unorthodox ministries through radical fairy tales that have now transcended their communal meaning.

At the end of the twentieth century these works of narrative fantasy endure not only as popular children's texts but as tales of transformation for adults who seek through mainstream churches, identity politics, and New Age therapies to connect the creative spirit of the inner Child and feminist and gay liberation with religious faith. In the case of Wilde, this appropriation is especially striking since a century ago his *Salome*, the

"Ur-nymphet" or "paedophile's femme fatale" of recent criticism, created such a stir in London with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role that the play was banned for portraying biblical characters on stage (Hutcheon 19). The 1998 *Anglican Digest*, however, recommends as "gems of Christian literature" the "children's stories" of Oscar Wilde, "one of the most fascinating figures of the nineteenth century"--"a must, not only for your children or grandchildren" (10). Wilde's once iconoclastic creeds now undergird a wide body of literature connecting faith with fiction in conservative and mainstream religious circles that look to the arts to "incarnate our experience of mystery, wonder and awe" and to "aid us to encounter the holy or sacred" in "the original vision" of embodied childhood (3). While writers like Woolf and Hemingway undermined a Godlike authorship in their fiction, contemporary novelists like Tim O'Brien in "The Lives of the Dead" (1990)<sup>2</sup> and Frederick Buechner in *The Wizard's Tide* (1987) illustrate how telling stories for a child within--oneself or an imagined other--can save us. As Buechner explains in his 1991 memoir, retelling the tale of his father's suicide "in language a child could understand" and reliving it "for that child and as that child" released him from the spiritual dungeon of his fifties (34).

The Romantic revaluation of childhood epitomized in William Wordsworth's paradox that "The Child is father of the Man" prefigures the sacred privilege of juvenile readers in the Victorian period, the Jungian archetypes of Christ and the child, MacDonald's reverence for the Childlike, and Rossetti's seductive nursery lyrics. Like Dickens's angelic girls, Wilde's injured boys and helpless "wee folk" have become a powerful trope of "post-traumatic culture," suggesting how homeless and [End Page 338] fatally abused children in the media indict a ruthless economic system (Kirby 132). At the same time Wilde, who wore a crucifix on his chest as he died, struggled to define something about himself through claiming the godlike inspiration of a first-century Jew. How Wilde identified with the prophet who came as a child, melted people's hearts, and was reviled and crucified illustrates, like Yeats's anecdote, the profit and peril of traipsing backwards to that distant uncharted borderland where words are first beginning to establish meaning on the tongue.

"The mind of a child is a great mystery . . . who shall divine it, or bring it its own peculiar delights?" Wilde remarked to Richard Le Gallienne about fairy tales. Before it "You humbly spread . . . the treasures of your imagination, and they are as dross" (252). Sanctifying and flirting with this impressionable subject beyond the generation gap, he embraced the Shavian irony that youth is wasted on the young. A flagrant cross-writer, he ignored conventional boundaries between juvenile and adult literature when he spun out two volumes of literary fairy tales in the 1880s and early 1890s, persuading many like Swinburne that turn-of-the-century writing for children--works like Graham's *The Golden Age* (1895) and E. Nesbit's Bastable stories--provided the best reading for adults. But when asked by a reviewer about the "suitability" for the young of *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Wilde remarked in a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, "I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public" (301).

Less catechetical than casuistical, Oscar Wilde claimed at his trial that "I rarely think

that anything I write is true." Although slighted until gay studies reenergized Wilde criticism, his nine fairy tales, written while he wrote *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890) and tasted both fatherhood and homosexual experience for the first time, are pivotal in understanding the consistency of Wilde's moral and aesthetic philosophy. Just as the ironic wit of *The Decay of Lying* rehabilitated fiction, the beautiful boy and the enchanted but "safe" turf of children's fantasy articulated Wilde's vision of pain as the redemptive heart of life. The doctrine of physical anguish and self-giving developed in "The Nightingale and the Rose," "The Happy Prince," "The Young King," "The Fisherman and His Soul," and "The Star Child" prefigures his later ennoblement of suffering as "the supreme emotion" in *De Profundis* and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

Wilde's unorthodox mingling of spirituality and sensuality, framed in moral guise, turned the Evangelical on its head in a darker, more disturbing way than MacDonald and Rossetti had done. Celebrating self-discovery and transformation over self-denial and obedience, he proclaimed in "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" that **[End Page 339]** "[t]he first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible" (1205). Blending biblical language with homoerotic imagery and Protestant discourses of heroic martyrdom, subverting the Victorian pathos of broken hearts and the cult of dying children, his tales are strikingly sad and graphic portrayals of expiation and renunciation, failure and death. Motifs of nakedness, penetration, piercing and wounding illuminate the perception of his own later extremity of hurt as a Tiger of Experience. Like childhood's "moments of being" that Virginia Woolf claimed as the basis of her creative life, the terrible shocks received in prison were ultimately viewed by Wilde as Blakean auguries, moments of searing revelation and visionary intensity. The face of the trooper Woolridge, hanged in Reading Gaol, Wilde said, would "haunt me till I die" (Ellman 533). Although they may be read like Rossetti's and MacDonald's tales as an alternative religious discourse, or what Ellman calls "sacraments of a lost faith" (299), Wilde's fairy tales also reveal why the child embodied the creative spring of his tragic sense of life. From this imaginative construct, he drew not only his flamboyant style and fatal boyish lover, but also his figure of Christ and the social conscience that compelled him to write on behalf of incarcerated juveniles. The Wildean child finally explains the mythologizing of his own public shaming and affliction in prison as a discovery of his Soul. "Praise makes me humble," he said, "but when I am abused I know I have touched the stars" (Redman 249).

"At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be," Wilde wrote in *De Profundis* (922). Not surprisingly, the sadness and grief of the fairy tales, which launched his great years of creative production, have been read as allegories of homosexual oppression. Why, for example, does "The Star Child" end on such a gratuitously melancholy note: "Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly" (284). "Was some deep tragic and prophetic instinct urging Oscar to anticipate the mere three years he himself was to live after his 'bitter' testing in prison?" Gary Schmidgall asks in *The Stranger Wilde* (148). Elucidating the tales as tragic idylls of the Love that dare not speak its name or wish fulfillment

fantasies of gay liberation (158) thus provides a compelling reading of Wilde's spiritual self-portrait of multiple selves. Wilde inscribed *The Happy Prince* to a special American friend, eleven years his junior: "Faery-stories for one who lives in Faery-Land" (Schmidgall 154). Presupposing the author's inner circle of gay male readers illuminates the existential estrangement pervading these wintry tales as well as the warm valedictory kisses that liberate and transform such odd couples as the happy prince and swallow, the fisherman **[End Page 340]** and his mermaid. But while the homosexual subtext in Wilde's other experiments in popular subgenres crackles with insouciant drawing room wit and urbane double entendres, the tension between child and adult reader and the presence of the child as auditor or observer in the fairy tales lend gravity to these works that deepen their resonance beyond the recovery of erotic messages from London's *fin de siècle* gay subculture.

Moreover, modern conceptions and analyses of sexuality, usually framed in secular contexts, may overlook why intense identification, or at-one-ment, with another person is so compellingly embodied in Wilde. Accused at his 1895 trial of "acts of gross indecency with another male person" (Hyde, *Trials* 1179), he eloquently defended the "deep, spiritual affection" between an elder and a younger man as the noblest of human attachments, "such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michaelangelo and Shakespeare." Wilde's brilliance in reviving the "idiom of Greek ideality" does not just signify, as Linda Dowling points out, a triumph of Victorian Hellenism and the seizing of a new vocabulary for "an epistemological space that would soon enough . . . be reconquered in the name of new clinical or psychiatric languages of sexual pathology" (3). Wilde, Ellman argues, was convicted for sexual acts that Douglas actually committed. His passionate apology for same-sex love while on trial was based on the enlargement of human capacities flowing not just from Oxbridge classical ideals and the one-on-one tutorial system but also from the Christian doctrine of atonement and a romanticized Jesus.

Combining these energies steadily undermined the idea of "effeminacy" as corrupt, "vain, luxurious, and selfish," and therefore dangerous as this master term had been used in British civic discourse over the previous two centuries. As Dowling points out, the "protean figure" of the *effeminatus* in classical republican theory relied not on the gender oppositions of today but on a conception of "aimless and self-regarding egoism" undermining the rights of full citizenship as these were thought to derive in ancient times from the willingness of a single warrior to die "in the name of a community not present on the field of battle" (7). Styling the aesthete as the champion of "purer" Platonic love and male procreancy, Wilde proclaimed at the end of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" that "the new Individualism is the new Hellenism" (1104) and resolved in his prison cell, where he read the Gospels in Greek, that his next work would be a study of Jesus as precursor of the Romantic movement. The prophet of individualism, Christ according to Wilde felt sympathy for mankind in ways that led him to realize "his perfection through pain" (1103).

Comparing miraculous scenes of feeding and corporal rescue in **[End Page 341]** MacDonald and of healing embrace and bodily recovery in Rossetti with scenes

of heterodox encounter and isolate injury in Wilde suggests how variously the fairy tale has served a faith whose murdered messiah has never lost his symbolic identity as a child. Nevertheless the choice of this traditional mode with pagan roots as an alternative religious discourse may seem an odd conjoining. Fiction was disdained in the Scots Calvinist ethos where George MacDonald grew up, and in more liberal environments where children's fairy tales still competed with the primer and the moral tale, educated adults influenced by German historical criticism had come to regard Christianity itself anthropologically. Matthew Arnold in his Preface to *God and the Bible* wrote in 1875, "For us, the God of popular religion is a legend, a fairy tale; learned theology has simply taken the fairy tale and dressed it metaphysically." In retrospect, however, it is the empirical and rationalizing trend of nineteenth-century thought--the positivist tendency to make science sacred--that makes fairy stories an attractive form in which to articulate a sacramental world view.

Not only did the use of a presumably less serious and traditional form generate a "willing suspension of disbelief," but this tolerant and looser genre was well-suited to writers reluctant to interpret their own works. In fact MacDonald, Rossetti, and Wilde each seems to have adopted this mode from a need to express a larger, more personal understanding of his or her own gendered spirituality than was available through conventional discourses. Christina Rossetti, for example, was excluded from the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood that her brother founded. When William Holman Hunt used her as a model for "The Light of the World," the painter was reviled by Thomas Carlyle for making Christ "a puer, weak, girl-faced nonentity, bedecked in a fine silken sort of gown" (Zemka 103). A life-long spinster, she dedicated her life to Anglo-Catholicism and the writing of poetry, much of it devotional, in the Tractarian mode. Working with her sister, an Anglican nun, with prostitutes at the St. Mary Magdalene Home, Rossetti dramatized in "Goblin Market" (1862) the psychological effects of succumbing to temptation. D. M. R. Bentley has conjectured that "Goblin Market" was read, or was written to be read, aloud by the author to an audience of Anglican sisters and fallen women at the House of Charity where Rossetti worked (58). As U. C. Knoepfelmacher points out, it is possible to read this work as "an Anglican tract, a lesbian allegory, a feminist manifesto" as well as "a children's book attractive to such major illustrators as Laurence Houseman (1893), Arthur Rackham (1933), and Martin Ware (1980)" (321). As Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's study of "Goblin Market" as a "cross-audience poem" suggests, the work cut through many boundaries from the outset: "it was written for adults; it [End Page 342] used the form of the children's fairy tale; and it was about sex" (183). Yet Rossetti claimed that the title work of her first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), which established her reputation in literary London, was simply a fairy tale. In 1904 when her brother William glossed this point, he only maintained that its "incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive, and different minds may be likely to read different messages into them" (459).

George MacDonald, who said he wrote for "the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five," went further in explaining the spiritual value of tales like *The Light Princess* (1864) which can't have one meaning. Called a *jeu d'esprit* by his son Greville

(324), this light, even satiric work parodies *Sleeping Beauty* and anticipates *The Waste Land* in using the Percival legend to portray the sterility of never connecting with other people. Along with *The Golden Key* (1867), *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Light Princess* has gained today what Jonathan Cott has called a "pop Scriptural status" for a Congregational minister forced to resign his pulpit because of his unorthodox beliefs about salvation. To account for the ongoing appeal of *The Light Princess* and other tales in 1904, Greville MacDonald recurred to the catechistic method of his father in "The Fantastic Imagination" where the process of "calling up" forgotten materials in writer and reader into "new forms" is given an extra-literary sanction: "When such forms are new embodiments of old truths we call them the product of the Imagination; when they are mere invention, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy." Sanctifying the mind of the maker as well as the "germinal power" of early life enabled the author not to dogmatize his writing. Instead he invited his auditors and readers to awaken and reverence the play of their own minds when he concluded "your meaning may be superior to mine" (317).

Wilde developed this creed of the redemptive power of Imagination by deifying and embodying Art, likening self-realization to at-onement. The experience of Russell Hoban, himself a children's writer, might exemplify Wilde's ideal reader. Hoban's memory of the look and feel of *A House of Pomegranates*, which he discovered at age eight or nine in the family library, exemplifies Terry Eagleton's assertion that "aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body" (13): "a small orange volume with the author's signature stamped in black on the cover . . . came off the shelf into my hand like magic," Hoban recalls, in a distant space where sunlight flooded his reading on a rose and gold Orientalish carpet (23). He credits "the Wildeness of the prose" in this volume bursting upon him "in widescreen glorious colour" with setting him on the writing road (29). "Enthralled by **[End Page 343]** the language and the brilliance of the images," he responded not only to the sadness of "The Fisherman and his Soul" but also to "the dark stillness and lethal clarity of the mirror in which the dwarf sees himself for the first time in 'The Birthday of the Infanta.' That mirror took me to a place I'd never known before, a place that has stayed with me ever since" (23). This child, a sensory explorer converted to art at the same time that he falls into Experience through the mirror of literature, fulfills Wilde's ultimate agenda: the only way a critic can interpret the personality and work of others is "by an intensification of his own personality": he must treat Art "not as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed . . . but as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify." Indeed the little boy's "wild" response to Yeats's hackneyed beginning is an exemplum of Wildean art, for Wilde celebrated interpretations that are in their own way "more creative than creation," likening the highest criticism to "the purest form of personal impression."

Developing his own embodied psychology of faerie, J. R. R. Tolkien, a Catholic whose orcs descended from "the goblin tradition" of MacDonald (178), suggested that children's books "like their clothes should allow for growth" and indeed encourage it. But he argued there is no natural connection between the minds of children and fairy stories, and he saw these tales as essentially Christian or as an archetypal version of the Christian (hi)story: among the marvels of the Gospels is "the greatest and most

complete conceivable eucatastrophe." For Tolkien, fantasy is "the most nearly pure . . . and so (when achieved) the most potent" form of Art (69), the one that helps us recover what age takes away: the capacity to "be startled anew" (77). The criminal prosecution in which Christ suffered unto blood may be counted a "good catastrophe" only in the "otherworld" setting the fairy tale provides: "a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur" (86). Evangelists, Tolkien argued, are no more the authors of the story of the Resurrection and how it becomes the eucatastrophe of the story of Incarnation than children are the sole or natural audience of these works of fantasy. Establishing the Child as a trope for the soul, Rossetti and MacDonald make happy endings of growing Childlike, bearing children, and the "sense of belonging" intrinsic to early oral tales (Zipes 2), but Wilde depicts the "terrible beauty" of human potential with darker irony, "on that imaginative plane of art where Love can indeed find in Death its rich fulfillment" (1045). Or as in "The Remarkable Rocket," "The Birthday of the Infanta," and "The Devoted Friend," he shows how the self can be destroyed, its capacity for growth wasted, thwarted, or blighted by egoism or the sadism of others.

*Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which was given by Charles Dodgson to **[End Page 344]** his friend MacDonald in manuscript to try out on his children, was dubbed by Harvey Darton "the spiritual volcano of children's books" (quoted in Dunsinberre 37). But the "directness of such work," inspired by Carroll's eros for little girls, did not encompass in its "liberty of thought" their own carnality. "Goblin Market" and *The Light Princess*--also tales of fallen females--showed several years before Lewis Carroll's secularizing text the spiritual implications of the female eros. In these tales a young hero and two heroines are saved--not by a magic wand or a prince galloping in or by awakening from a dream--but by the utterly real self-sacrifice of a peer. Yet unlike in Wilde's tales, each case of atonement involves scenes of eucharistic tasting. Unusual sexual overtones arise in these intense moments of bonding and conjure the agony of the addicted. "Curious Laura" regenders Francesco Petrarca's "disastrous passion" as Rossetti described it in *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* (1857-1863): the poet-lover became a "veritable slave of love," "harassed" by "temptations of the flesh" from the moment he "first beheld that incomparable golden-haired Laura" (164). After seeing the Goblin Men, Laura "sucked and sucked and sucked the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard bore, / She sucked until her lips were sore; / Then flung the emptied rines away." Gnashing her teeth "in a passionate yearning," "weeping as if her heart would break," Laura is then tortured by cravings for exotic fruits but is never able to hear the goblin men hawking their wares a second time. Her sister Lizzie, who brings back the fruit as medicine for Laura, defies the goblins, refusing to eat in a violent and graphic scene suggesting rape. But with the syrup running down her face, the pulp smashed to her lips, she rushes back to Laura crying,

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me:  
Laura, make much of me:



For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin men.

After a hideously painful convalescence in which the antidote acts like poison on Laura, the poem celebrates the power of sisterhood:

For there is no friend like a sister  
In calm or stormy weather  
To cheer one on the tedious way  
To fetch one if one goes astray  
To lift one if one totters down  
To strengthen whilst one stands. [End Page 345]

In *The Light Princess* a baby cursed by a bad fairy at her christening is deprived of her gravity. The child sails laughingly above the heads of adults, unable to touch ground or feel anything but giddy delight. Even spectacles of human suffering give her "violent hysterics." At seventeen, however, she discovers ecstasy in swimming, especially with the help of a young prince who jumps off cliffs into a lake with the light princess in his arms. The two share a passion for plunging into the warm water and floating together on moonlit nights until the lake begins to dry up--a drought caused by the killjoy wicked fairy. The prince, who has "fallen" for the weightless princess, offers to staunch the flow of the lake with his own body since only a voluntary human sacrifice can reverse the curse. The princess, who just cares about swimming in her lake, falls asleep in a boat while the young prince awaits death by drowning. At his request, she offers him biscuit, wine, and then a "long, sweet, cold kiss" before he goes under. But as the bubbles of his last breath break on the water, she "gives a shriek," springs into the lake and risks her own life to save him. Only the next morning, when the young prince revives, does she finally burst into tears and regain gravity, as the rain falls throughout the land.

Traditionally fairy-tale characters are destined to be orphaned, exposed, and abandoned so they can go on perilous quests, be empowered by magic, and eventually transformed into sparkling adults. In Rossetti's and MacDonald's fairylands, however, the misogynist myth of Eve's frailty and biblical pattern of fall and redemption are framed as sexual maturation, a process occurring in an interpersonal context where acts of intercession diminish individual achievement and autonomy. Alone, each heroine is completely lost were it not for the intervention of a Christ-like friend. In "Goblin Market" "sweet-tooth" delight is prelude to enthrallment and death, while in MacDonald's work, bodily pleasure leads to authentic recovery and flowering fertility. But both fairylands offer a world apart to explore how a riot of sexual yearning leads to a recognition of self-giving as the ultimate human value. Such an accommodating space was not available in the realistic novel of the period. Nor presumably in juvenile literature--even if such writing, because children were deemed innocent, generally went uncensored. Although Wordsworth suggested in "We Are Seven" that children could not conceive of death, Rossetti and MacDonald portray the prospect of dying young without sentimental piety or reverence for the ideal of progress implicit in

the *bildungsroman*. The spiritual awakening of both heroines is manifested by their growing young at the end: Laura wakes laughing "in the old innocent way . . . her gleaming locks showed not thread of grey," and the light princess finds herself lying on the floor like a baby who must learn to walk. [End Page 346]

After administering last rites, the princess jumps into the lake to save the prince, a reversal no less surprising than Lizzie's rescue of Laura from the harassment of stunted animal men. The triumph of virginity and heroic resistance, the womanly eucharist and Rossetti's pun on cloistered "sisters" together suggest the relevance of this text for feminist theology. MacDonald also revived the Motherhood of God from medieval mysticism in images of female plenitude and power that resonate with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portraits. North Wind, for example, has a streaming mane of hair that blends with the night: the darkness of Diamond's hayloft looked "as if it were made of her hair." Her numinous presence and that of MacDonald's other magical grandmother and goddess figures, wise old women and earth sprites, communicate Juliana of Norwich's insight that at the core of life all will be well. Cultivating a language to express the interiority of things when seen from the vantage point of spiritual enlightenment, he asked,

Why should I not speculate in the only direction in which things worthy of speculation appear likely to lie? There is a wide *may* bearound us and every speculation widens the probability of changing the *may be* into the is.

In their complex and haunting symbolism developed with Pre-Raphaelite visual intensity, MacDonald and Rossetti defamiliarize the ordinary as Wilde does--whether it be voluptuous goblin fruit or tears that fall like jewels of rain, or a marvelous rose, crimson as a ruby at the heart. These puzzling images, ellipses and reversals, oppositional language and symbolist techniques reclaim the creative and mythmaking power for the religious sensibility. Like Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," these fairy tales work to regenerate ways of seeing the human body and to stimulate a palpable understanding of their parabolic meanings.

"Evangelicalism at its best is an offensive religion," Mark Noll argues, and Ruskin found scenes of a girl's maturing sexuality and loss of restraint in *The Light Princess* salacious. But MacDonald's wish to awaken the emotional imagination is grounded in his sense of how body and spirit are interconnected in the mutual dependence of male and female development. The hungry female kisses that exorcise Laura's "poison in the blood" become a distant memory at the end of "Goblin Market" when both sisters become wives "with children of their own," and Laura weaves cautionary tales of "her early prime." That Lizzie "stood in deadly peril to do her good" acts as a warning of forbidden pleasures, for few Victorian parents would advocate careers culminating in martyrdom. (Wilde's mother was an exception.) The assault on Lizzie suggests Stephen's grisly fate, described with agonizing traits in Acts. Yet writers who would make [End Page 347] Christ's love real, that is, relevant and contemporary, cannot leave the Cross as a dogmatic abstraction: they must reconcile a criminally executed Jew with a divine Savior. When Paul developed the classic theory

of atonement that in Christ God is Man and Man is God (2 Cor. 5:19), he also gave rise to the notion of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor.12:27), an entity later enlisted by the penance tradition as an essential mediator of forgiveness. Preaching the widest, simplest basis for salvation--identification of "Christ as the source of Life"--and distancing himself from the doctrine of vicarious atonement and the punitive God it implied became a critical issue in MacDonald's search for a parish after losing his first (and only) pastorate at Arundel. <sup>3</sup> Discarding the Calvinist notion of infant depravity, he drew on a christology of the child that developed in early Christianity as well as the ancient tradition in which the newly baptized or converted were considered as newborn or small children (Bovon 20). Embodying the mind of a beginner in the flesh of a child, he celebrated the abandonment of *a priori* modes of thought. To rouse trust, that "indescribable vague intelligence" that enables progress through Experience, he placed at the heart of *The Golden Key*(1865), "in the secret of the earth and all its ways," the oldest man of all who can help everybody--a naked child "who had no smile, but the love in his large grey eyes was deep as the center" (61). In *Phantastes*, which C. S. Lewis claimed had "baptized his imagination," MacDonald's narrator states:

It is no use trying to account for things in fairy land; and one who travels there soon learns to forget the whole idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes; like a child, who being in a chronic state of wonder, is surprised by nothing.

Wilde's sexuality and utopian orientation toward Individualism radicalized the socializing mission of the literary fairy tale in starker ways than Rossetti and MacDonald. While the latter emphasize the miraculous change of life that standing in another's place can bring, Wilde is closer to the penance tradition in his vision of Christ as the Man of Sorrows and his emphasis on feeling others' pain as prelude to self-sacrifice. Rossetti's idyll of sisterly love is set in an elfin glen where wares luscious as budding sexuality are hawked morning and night; MacDonald's Fairyland offers journeys to mystic awareness. But Wilde's settings are detailed like Blake's visionary and satiric *Songs* to depict the brutal injustice and crass conformity of contemporary society. Whatever sacred moments of sacrificial love arise amid the world's wanton cruelty thus come as fleeting miracles. No feeding ritual makes self and other "one body." Instead neglect of the poor is expiated by the Star-Child in beatings by a Magician who "set before him an empty trencher, and said, 'Eat,' and an empty cup [End Page 348] and said, 'Drink'" (199). At the end of "The Happy Prince," an Angel brings God the Prince's leaden heart and the dead bird from a trash heap: their suffering is sanctified as "the two most precious things in the city" (291).

While the Grimms rarely eliminated violence from *Nursery and Household Tales* (1817), lurid depictions of murder, cannibalism, and mutilation were muted in fairy tales written during Victoria's reign. Self-inflicted injury or the sight of a horrifying and alien face in the mirror were not part of this complacent agenda. But the practice of reading the body of a dying child for signs of God's presence had shaped the earliest tradition of writing for juveniles in the seventeenth century and had mutated into the most sentimental scenes of Victorian novels. Literary representations of the spiritual precocity of dying children, like scenes of execution in John Foxe's *Book of*

*Martyrs*, shaped the enduring ideal of protestant heroism. Wilde's description of Guido Reni's St. Sebastian recalls these Marian martyrs who affirm their identity as true Christians by gestures like clapping their hands in the flames.

When Wilde wrote in 1886, "I would go to the stake for a sensation and be a sceptic to the last," he added that one infinite fascination remained for him, "the mystery of moods." His fairy tales, he said, were "Studies in prose . . . meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (*Letters* 219). The poignant and satiric tonalities of the tales, which verge on religious mysticism as they expound a Christian socialism, sound a dual audience. They invert the logic of Janeway's premature little adults and the Victorian morbidity of gazing on childish pain by registering a childlike responsiveness to the feelings of others, a compelling lyric to which adults are tone deaf. The prosperous Miller's youngest son in "The Devoted Friend," for example, hears of little Hans the gardener having troubles, and wants to invite little Hans into their home, saying, "I will give him half my porridge, and show him my white rabbits." At this he is rebuked by his father with a hearty sermon:

What a silly boy you are! . . . I really don't know what is the use of sending you to school. You seem not to learn anything. Why if Little Hans came up here, and saw our warm fire, and 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 certainly will not allow Hans's nature to be spoiled. I am his best friend, and I will always watch over him, and see that he is not led into any temptations. (303)

"When friends are in trouble, they should be left alone," the Miller righteously declares. Opposed to this paternalistic exploitation of the poor, which institutionalizes pain through schooling, church, and state, is [End Page 349] Wilde's representation of childhood as fraught with passionate personal experience. Although feelings of being lost, confused, vulnerable, and small are aroused, Wilde avoids what Marina Warner calls "the Oxfam Syndrome"--which makes the oppression of children "look like endemic, perennial hopelessness" (47)--by drawing on energies of creatures like "the little people" of Irish folklore. The small boy in "The Selfish Giant" and the Star-Child are christlike beings who emanate new life; they function in the narrative like Jungian archetypes to pave "the way for a future change in personality" (83). The Giant who has built a wall around his garden so children can't trespass has a change of heart when he sees a boy "so small he could not reach up to the branches of the tree . . . wandering all around it and crying bitterly" (298). After he has kissed the boy, opened his garden to all the children, and grown old, his special little friend reappears with wounds on his hands and feet. His longing for the Christ child prefigures the salvation that awaits the Giant in death, as he leaves his body to join the boy in Paradise. That we do not see this child receive stigmata after the conversion of the Giant is characteristic of the way Wilde represents suffering as unseen theatrical.

Gaston Bachelard observed that "the nest image is generally childish. . . . Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes cover, hides

away, lies snug, is concealed" (93). Within these intricately framed tales are nested multiple narratives that converge on or circle round some secret or unregarded pain at their heart. Culminating moments of misery, public spectacles or private exhibitions of pain, strike contradictory responses in bystanders--the romantic, the pragmatist, and the cynic parody Victorian community in their solipsistic points of view. Only to the statue of the Happy Prince comes the revelation in his blindness that "[t]here is no Mystery so great as Misery" (290). Only the Charity School children recognize the Prince as an Angel like the one they have seen in their dreams. To the Mayor and the Town Councillors--the philistine, utilitarian, and worldly--the statue divested of gold looks shabby, "[l]ittle better than a beggar" (291). When Wilde asked in prison if his hair must be cut, he added with tears in his eyes, "You don't know what it means to me." The hair was cut. "The horror of Prison life," he later wrote, "is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one's aspect, and the tragedy in one's soul" (Ellman 496). Such oppositions that privilege suffering on a private stage form the crux of Wilde's tales.

In "The Nightingale and the Rose," for example, a little bird leaves her nest in the oak tree to enact the highest form of sympathy. To help a student in the agonies of unrequited love, the nightingale impales herself on a thorn to create a red rose for the youth to give to his beloved. Moving **[End Page 350]** from spectatorship to identification and finally to self-abandonment and hurt, the nightingale herself proves to be the true lover and artist. Wilde wrote his own name into the poetry describing the fierce pang that shot through her at the last: "Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb." Yet the nightingale's sacrifice is callously ignored and misunderstood: when the girl rejects his red rose, the student throws this token of the nightingale into the gutter where a cart wheels over it. Nevertheless, the personal injuries that inscribe Wilde's modes of self-realization gesture toward a transfigured realm. At the little bird's "last burst of music,"

[t]he white Moon. . . forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river and they carried its message out to sea. (295)

Of Jesus, Wilde said, "one always thinks of him . . . as a lover for whose love the whole world was too small" (925). The too small world of partial and partisan vision depicted in these narratives ultimately conjures a God-suffused reaction. Crucifixion, the highest mode of perfection in a hostile world, can only be seen as sublime in a realm that cannot be figured. Wilde's use of Christian metaphor anticipates Tolkien's claim that the fairy tale "does not deny the existence of . . . sorrow and failure" but gives "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (86).

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## Notes

1. Contending with apostates in mid-third-century Rome, Cyprian used Paul's notion of the church as the body of Christ to establish an ecclesiastical centralized hierarchy in which bishops had authority to approve penance for the lapsed and to forgive those who had made sacrifices to the emperor. See Daniel Goodenough, "Repentance of Life vs. The Work of Penance," unpublished manuscript, 1975, p. 53.

2 Brian Attebery suggests "postmodernism is a return to story-telling in the belief that we can be sure of nothing but story" (40). O'Brien opens, "But this too is true: stories can save us" (255).

3. "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." (1 Rom 12:4, 5). See *The Letters of George MacDonald*: "I believe in the perfect and full atonement of Jesus Christ--that he has, as it were, saved all men already, if by unbelief they did not put themselves out of his salvation" (24). His belief that animals have souls and the Heathen might be saved in the afterlife were deemed heretical at Arundel (Greville MacDonald, 180).

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