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Beguiling Time in Wonderland, Neverland and Fairyland

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How shall we beguile the lazy time if not with some delight?
Theseus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The above epigraph occurs between two significant events. Theseus has wed Hippolyta, but the nuptial union is still distant. Between these fecund moments, time drags, does not seem to have any order or importance, and is experienced as mere sequentiality. Theologians call these two kinds of time *chronos* and *kairos*, moments empty of intelligible meaning (*chronos*) and moments redolent with significance (*kairos*). Paul Tillich, for instance, says that “*chronos* is clock time, time which is measured, as we have it in words like ‘chronology’ and ‘chronometer’” whereas “*kairos* is not the quantitative time of the clock, but the qualitative time of the occasion, the right time” (1). Theseus calls upon fantasy (in the form of the homespun mechanicals’ mythical play) to overcome the empty tedium of “chronicity,” and to transform *chronos* into *kairos* or at least to dull the tedium of “lazy time”.¹

Victorians understood the burdens of chronicity. Much of their world was obsessed with punctuality, productivity, efficiency and all other aspects of sequential time. To take just one example, *The Times* complained on October 8, 1861, that as a result of railway time and train timetables holidays entailed ‘a perpetual attention to time, and all the anxieties and irritations of that responsibility’ (qtd. in Flanders 196). Perhaps it is not surprising then that some Victorians turned to fantasy as a refuge and rebellion against the seeming tyranny of *chronos*, for, in addition to filling lazy time, fantasy also plays with the very concept of time. As a genre one of its central concerns is exploring modes beyond linear time. J. R. R. Tolkien observes that fantasy stories “open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe” (114). It would be a mistake, moreover, to assume that all works of fantasy treat chronicity in the same way, that is, by suspending it or ignoring it. Indeed, a close reading of three of the most well-known Victorian fantasy worlds—Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland, J. M. Barrie’s Neverland and George MacDonald’s Fairyland—reveals that Victorian writers had very divergent ideas about how to go about beguiling lazy time.²

When: Symbolic Time of Day

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fantasy is symbolized by the night-time world of Oberon, Titania and the fairies. It is an anarchic land where chronicity is overthrown, and the time-structure of dreams reigns unchallenged. But it is sometimes overlooked that the daytime world of Theseus with its law, order and reason is no less fantastical. Both worlds are creations of Shakespeare's imagination, mirroring alternate modalities of human experience. In this way the parallel worlds of Theseus and Oberon explore different aspects of time through fantasy. Similarly, it is too easily assumed that fantasy worlds such as Wonderland, Fairyland and Neverland are necessarily and directly connected with night and dreams. But this is not the case. Each magical land is associated with a special time of the day and hence with a different experience of time.

Wonderland, for instance, is set somewhat precisely in the middle of the day, after lunch but before tea. The book begins with Alice struggling to transform *chronos* into *kairos*:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daises, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. (Carroll 7)

Alice is bored. Due to a lack of significant activity time has lost its meaning, and Alice finds herself feeling desultory and lazy. In the words of Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth-century monk and desert father, Alice is experiencing the effects of *acedia*, "the noonday demon" which "makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all" and which causes "laziness" and "untimely drowsiness" (99, 64). Boredom, in other words, is most associated with that span of time after lunch but before the evening, when the sun is at its hottest and when due to our terrestrial perspective it appears that the sun stands still. Wonderland enters the story as a means of filling up the yawning chasm of afternoon boredom.

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Not surprisingly, the fantasy ends with Alice's sister waking her up because Alice is *late* for tea: "It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly; but now run in to your tea: it's getting late" (98). A significant moment has arrived in the everyday world, and fantasy is no longer needed to provide amusement. It has performed its function and is relegated to the past (italicization of *was*) while chronicity reasserts its primacy.

Wonderland therefore inhabits that lazy period of the afternoon when time seems to stand still. It is emphatically a *day*-dream and not a night-dream. Alice's encounters likewise reflect this symbolic setting. Instead of focusing on potent myths or archetypes like night-dreams, the episodes mainly revolve around logical puzzles and linguistic play. It is not so much that the rational daytime mind has shut down and given the unconscious mind free reign but that the rational mind itself has decided to have a bit of fun. Consider for example two stanzas from "You Are Old, Father William":

"You are old," said the youth, "and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—
Pray, how did you manage to do it?"

"In my youth," said his father, "I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw
Has lasted the rest of my life." (39)

Carroll is parodying Robert Southey's poem for children "The Old Man's Comforts, and How He Gained Them." Here are its final stanzas:

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
And life must be hast'ning away;
You are cheerful, and love to converse upon death!
Now tell me the reason, I pray.

I am cheerful, young man, Father William replied,
Let the cause thy attention engage;
In the days of my youth, I remember'd my God!
And He hath not forgotten my age. (228)

Carroll places in Alice's mouth a version of the poem that comically undermines Southey's moralistic sentiments, yet Carroll's poem does this whilst maintaining perfect meter and rhyme. The fantasy involved—so vividly portrayed by Tenniel's illustrations—results from linguistic play with like-sounding words and rhythms that is in one sense highly rational. Though the mind is freed from the need to conform to everyday experience or social mores, it nevertheless must follow a strict set of verbal rules. Alice's version also parodies time itself for "old" is divorced from its primary association with death (as in Southey's poem) and the youth is allowed simply to marvel at the peculiarities of his father. Set within the long afternoon span when the sun seems to move slowly or not at all, Wonderland doubts time's inevitable outcome, and in so doing uncovers overlooked wonders.

Wonderland also derails the directedness of time. Donald Rackin argues that time is "frozen" in Wonderland (367), and U. C. Knoepfelmacher seems to agree when he observes that "the teleology posited by adults does not operate in Wonderland" (175). If Alice has any goal in entering Wonderland, it is catching up with the one character who has a notion of time—the pocket watch carrying white rabbit. In the final trial, the white rabbit acts as a kind of angel of the last judgment—with his trumpet, his watch and his scroll—initiating the trial and keeping it flowing in the proper order. But Alice turns out to be the God of Wonderland whose last judgment—"you are nothing but a pack of cards"—brings about the world's apocalypse and her return to the everyday world where time has meaning again because she is late for tea (97).

Barrie's Neverland, meanwhile, dwells in the symbolic span of night, specifically the night-time experience of dreaming children. When the children ask Peter the way to Neverland, he points to a star and says, "second to the right and straight on till morning" (43). To reach Neverland they must plunge deeper into the night and carry on flying until the return of day. Mrs. Darling moreover learns about Peter and Neverland when the children are dreaming for "it is the nightly custom of every good mother after her

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children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning” (5). She does not, however, find a unified vision of Neverland for as the narrator comments “the Neverlands vary a good deal” but they are “always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there” (6). By emphasizing the multiplicity of Neverland, Barrie connects it with the individual dream worlds of the various children, and whilst they “play at it by day” it is only at night that “it becomes very nearly real” (6). Furthermore, Neverland is “not large and sprawly, with tedious distances between one adventure and another, but nicely crammed” (7). In other words, like a dream Neverland has no lazy time between significant events; instead, it moves seamlessly from one exciting moment to the next.

In the swift succession of adventures time itself becomes somewhat blurred. As the children fly away with Peter to Neverland, they lose their ability to gauge the passing of time: [John and Michael] recalled with contempt that not so long ago they had thought themselves fine fellows for being able to fly around a room. Not so long ago. But how long ago? They were flying over the sea before this thought began to disturb Wendy seriously. John thought it was their second sea and their third night. Sometimes it was dark and sometimes light, and now they were very cold and again too warm. Did they really feel hungry at times, or were they merely pretending? (43)

The dream-logic of Neverland drains times and seasons of their distinctive meaning as all experiences become part of one continuous moment. There is no boredom in Neverland but neither is there any event that stands out from another thereby allowing some measurement of the passage of time. Like the dreamer’s experience of night, time seems to pass both in the blink of an eye (when one falls asleep one seems to be instantaneously transported to the morning) and to dilate and stretch indefinitely (a dream can seem to extend for days or even years).

Thus, whereas Wonderland is a fantasy of daytime rationality playing with language and logic, Neverland is a night-time fantasy of events and mythical action. Neverland has an insatiable lust for stories. When Peter and the lost boys are not having their own adventures, their favourite activity is listening to stories, a fact that Wendy utilizes to tempt Peter into taking her and her brothers to Neverland: “‘Don’t go, Peter,’ she entreated, ‘I know such lots of stories.’ . . . He came back, and there was a greedy look in his eyes now which ought to have alarmed her, but did not” (35). This love of narrative action means that

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Neverland is packed with all the most exciting bits from other stories—pirates, Indians, mermaids, fairies, crocodiles, and secret hideouts. There does not need to be an aesthetic reason for mixing these images because Neverland exists in the night-time world of dreams where the important thing is that thrilling event should follow thrilling event in a never-ending succession, an experience of time in which the meaningfulness of *kairos* is somewhat sinisterly wedded to the repetitiveness of *chronos*.

MacDonald's Fairyland, on the other hand, is poised between night and day at the liminal moment of twilight. "The Golden Key", for instance, begins: "There was a boy who used to sit in the twilight and listen to his great-aunt's stories" (120). Twilight for MacDonald is emblematic of the experience of reading stories because when reading a story one is betwixt worlds (one's own life and the world of the story) in the same way that sunset and sunrise are the times between day and night. The boy, Mossy, lives on the borders of Fairyland and longs to find the golden key which only appears in Fairyland at the bottom of a rainbow. Not surprisingly, Mossy's opportunity to enter Fairyland and find the key comes at twilight:

One evening, in summer, he went into his own room, and stood at the lattice-window, and gazed into the forest which fringed the outskirts of Fairyland. . . . The forest lay to the east, and the sun, which was setting behind the cottage, looked straight into the dark wood with his level red eye. . . . The trunks stood like rows of red columns in the shine of the red sun, and he could see down aisle after aisle in the vanishing distance. And as he gazed into the forest he began to feel as if the trees were all waiting for him, and had something they could not go on with till he came to them. (121)

Sunset is a time of special revelation when things that appear ordinary in the bright light of midday suddenly take on a new and strange significance. The angle of the sun allows the light to penetrate the dark wood in a way that would never happen if the sun was directly overhead. Twilight itself becomes the golden key that opens a gateway to other worlds and other experiences of time. For Mossy it is a time so full of meaning that he feels as if even the trees are waiting for him.

In "Cross Purposes" MacDonald makes it clear that Fairyland is a place "where the sun is always setting" (104). Whereas Wonderland is a day-dream and Neverland is a night-dream, Fairyland is more akin to a waking vision. Unlike midday when the senses are dulled by heat and laziness or like night-time when consciousness gives way to the unconscious, twilight is a period of acute sensitivity. It is the moment when

past and future briefly come into contact and an individual can both reflect upon the past and see into the future. At the end of “Little Daylight” after the prince has kissed the princess without knowing it (that is, thinking that she was an old woman and not herself) she is miraculously transformed into her radiant self and the story ends in twilight:

The first gleam of the morning was caught on her face: that face was bright as the never-ageing Dawn, and her eyes were lovely as the sky of darkest blue. The prince recoiled in over-mastering wonder. . . .

“You kissed me when I was an old woman: there! I kiss you when I am a young princess,” murmured Daylight.—“Is that the sun coming?” (164)

Daylight’s nonchalant response to receiving her lifelong desire—being restored to normalcy so that she can see the sun—reflects some of the time experience of twilight. Past, present and future are packed into one brilliant moment. In three quick sentences Daylight moves from reflecting upon the past (“you kissed”) to acting in the present (“I kiss”) to anticipating the joys of the future (“is that the sun coming?”). The brevity of twilight is deceptive. Despite its quantitative lack of *chronos* twilight carries an unusual plenitude of signification. Fairyland participates in this twilight experience and thus beguiles time by intensifying it rather than suspending or doubting it.

Symbolically, then, Fairyland dwells in the sunset whilst Neverland occupies the night-time world of dreams and Wonderland lives in the lazy afternoon span between lunch and evening. MacDonald, Barrie and Carroll set their fantastic worlds at different times of day in their individual attempts to beguile lazy time. But how exactly do they structure their stories, and what chronological effects are created by these structures?

How: The Tenses of Genre

Because Wonderland, Neverland and Fairyland all contain non-realistic elements such as mermaids, griffins and gnomes, the works in which they appear are usually considered members of the same genre—fantasy. Broadly speaking and in comparison to works like *Middlemarch* this distinction is accurate, but from a more

nuanced genre perspective the apparent similarities transform into surprising differences, differences that are especially noticeable if one attends to the chronological tenses of genre.

In a letter to Tom Taylor, the editor of *Punch* and prolific playwright, in which Lewis Carroll sought advice on names, *Alice* is described as follows: “I should be very glad if you could help me in fixing a name for my fairy-tale . . . The heroine spends an hour underground, and meets various birds, beasts, etc. (*no* fairies), endowed with speech. The whole thing is a dream, but *that* I don’t want revealed till the end” (Carroll, *Selected Letters* 29). Carroll establishes the story in one form—the fairytale—but then radically undercuts this genre with a final calculated revelation that shows the whole to be a dream. This might seem innocent enough, but structurally it is quite subversive—as Carroll well knew—and has greatly contributed to the book’s genre confusion.

As J. R. R. Tolkien argues in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” singling out *Alice* as the prime offender, it is “essential to a genuine fairy-story as distinct from the employment of this form for lesser or debased purposes that it be presented as ‘true’” (104). Tolkien’s biased language aside, his genre distinction is representative for as Todorov points out “a genre is always defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it” (27). For *Alice* the relevant sub-genres, according to Todorov, are the marvelous (the supernatural assumed), the uncanny (the supernatural explained), and the fantastic (the hesitation or uncertainty between the uncanny and the marvelous). What Carroll does, therefore, is to begin his story in the marvelous only to shift it violently to the uncanny in the last page without ever pausing in the fantastic. But what does this mean in terms of the metaphysics of time in *Alice*? According to Todorov, these three genres each in some way reflect a chronological tense:

The marvelous corresponds to an unknown phenomenon, never seen as yet, still to come—hence to a future; in the uncanny, on the other hand, we refer the inexplicable to known facts, to a previous experience, and thereby to the past. As for the fantastic itself, the hesitation which characterizes it cannot be situated, by and large, except in the present. (42)

Carroll’s sudden shifting of genre moves the reader from the time where anything is possible (the future) and relocates them to the time where nothing new is (the past). If the story only exists in the past, then its claim upon reality weakens. The time that Alice spends in Wonderland thus has only a shadowy ontology—

somewhat like Plato's view of art as an imitation of an imitation—as does the reader's experience of the tale:

And, though the shadow of a sigh
 May tremble through the story
For “happy summer days” gone by,
 And vanish'd summer glory—
It shall not touch with breath of bale,
 The pleasance of our fairy-tale. (103)

Almost as if embarrassed by his stories, Carroll limits their import to entertainment and denigrates their present and future significance. The summer days are “gone by” and the summer glory has “vanish'd,” but they can still be enjoyed in the present through the vehicle of memory. Commenting on Carroll's use of memory Lionel Morton says that Carroll “surrounded the two stories of Alice's adventures in a golden nostalgic haze—deliberately evoking the sense of the past in presenting them to his readers.” (288). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is thus an exploration of the glorious past from the perspective of a disenchanted present.

Furthermore, what is emphatically denied by the final revelation that all has been a dream is the future tense. When Alice runs in to have tea, her *older* sister stays behind and frames Alice's dream with her own thoughts:

But her sister sat still just as she left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion. . . . So she sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality. . . . Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would keep, through all her riper years, the simple loving heart of her childhood; . . . and how she would feel with [the children's] simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (98-99)

Interestingly, unlike all that has come before, this final reflection occurs in twilight, in the time between times, and for an instant the reader is led to believe that a vista on the future has suddenly opened. But not only is the present disenchanted by this glorious dream of the past (the sister has but to open her eyes to find “dull reality” again), so too is the future. The future in this passage is merely a colony for the past. On account of its greater distance from the “happy summer days” the future is even bleaker than the present—its only comfort being the nurturing of other children and remembering the past. Carroll’s seemingly innocuous decision to make his story a dream, therefore, makes Wonderland into a past-tense reality with little impact on the present or future.

Barrie’s *Peter Pan and Wendy*, on the other hand, has no final genre inversion—it both begins and ends in the marvelous. The opening line, “All children, except one, grow up,” is an impossible statement that immediately signals the unflinching supernatural character of story. Similarly, the last paragraph of the book tells of Wendy’s “hair becoming white” while her daughter Jane is also “now a common grown-up” whose daughter Margaret is now the one going with Peter to Neverland. The final line then recapitulates the book’s first line: “When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless” (185). The ending is ambiguous in terms of its moral, but from a genre perspective the story ends exactly as it begins. Moreover, the Darling family and the portrayal of London are just as fantastic as Neverland, as demonstrated especially by Barrie’s choice of a St Bernard for a nurse. To put it in Todorov’s terms, there is no hesitation or uncertainty experienced by the reader as to whether or not the supernatural events are real.³ If Todorov is right about the marvelous corresponding to the future tense, this should mean that *Peter Pan and Wendy* is somehow orientated toward the future, and indeed as we have seen Neverland is a place of perpetual possibility that is always looking for the next adventure. Barrie is at pains to point out that Peter has virtually no memory and thus no concept or lasting connection to the past, though his connection to the future is also problematic given his perpetual refusal of a normal child’s future (job, marriage, responsibility). For the children, meanwhile, Neverland is a futural playground—John and Michael get to fight savages and pirates like men in the British military at the turn of the century while Wendy gets to play

at being a mother and wife. Perhaps this is why access to Neverland is restricted to children: it is only open to those who have so much of their future left to explore.

The paradox of the opening and closing lines, however, is that the perpetual futurity of children is somehow mirrored or even made possible by Peter's lack of an actual future. Children can continue to play with their dreams of being grown-up precisely because Peter refuses or is denied the possibility of growing up himself. *Peter Pan and Wendy* is thus simultaneously about growing up and not growing up. This dual experience of time is symbolized by the two title characters, each of whom attempts to pull their opposite into their time frame. Peter tries to convince Wendy to stay in Neverland and then later to prevent her return to London by force while Wendy seeks to lure Peter into the grown-up world of romantic love and social responsibility. Peter refuses limiting choices (such as an occupation or a monogamous relationship) because as the eternal child he is pure potentiality, whereas Wendy is much more enamored of actuality (she is the only character who retains her memory in Wonderland).

Interestingly, however, both characters lack a significant present. The present according to Todorov is the "pure limit between the past and the future" and thus the moment when past and future meet (42). Though Peter has a virtually infinite past, he cannot access it because he has no memory. The past and the future are forever separated in him on account of his lack of a present tense. Wendy meanwhile is denied a significant present tense on account of her association with Peter. When in the final pages Barrie flashes forward to show Wendy's daughter Jane, and her daughter Margaret going away with Peter what is skipped over is Wendy's transition from the imagined futurity of Neverland where she played at being a mother to her actual future with a real daughter. Barrie, unlike Carroll, lets his feminine child have an actual future (rather than the imaginary one given to Alice by her sister), but in the process he elides the present, for the only way for Wendy to have a daughter who can then go with Peter to Neverland (and perpetuate the line of "gay, innocent and heartless" children) is if her past and future had met at some point with the past and future of an actual man. Yet though this male presence must be assumed to explain Wendy's offspring, he is kept out of sight because the present, as the moment of limits and actuality, is anathema to Neverland.

Neverland's refusal of the present also sheds light on the book's relationship to other genres.

Jacqueline Rose has noted how *Peter Pan and Wendy* is a "little history of children's fiction in itself" for "it brings together the adventure story for boys, the domestic story and the fairy tale" (77). There is an excess of meaning that is produced through these multiple associations that is "too much," according to Rose, which results in the book becoming "something of a pastiche with nothing that really corresponds to these types of literature at the level of their form" (78). Neverland borrows from the adventure story, the fairytale and the domestic story their futural elements—all their potentiality, their promise of excitement, danger, mystery and romance. At the same time, however, Neverland denies the limiting aspects of genre, everything that makes a story definitely one thing and not another. Karen McGavock has argued that Barrie himself had an "impetus to defy categorization and remain ineffable" and that this lack of fixity was imbued into the genre play of *Peter Pan and Wendy* (211). More than even its futural orientation, then, Neverland is essentially a denial or deferral of the present tense for the present is the moment of fixity, when everything is limited and narrowed down to one definite, unrepeatable experience.

In contrast to Barrie, MacDonald embraced a single genre, the fairytale, working from within its limitations and traditions. Many critics, including Todorov, would place the fairytale in the genre of the marvelous (54). Whilst this generalization is probably accurate when it comes to folktales, something slightly more complex occurs with literary fairytales. When a modern author works within the oral folk tradition there is inevitably a gap between the author's intentions and those of the fairytale. In the Victorian period, this gap tended to produce one of three effects: irony, sentimentality or moralism. The moralist treated the fairytale merely as a means to an ethical end as in the case of George Cruikshank using fairytales to promote temperance. In William Thackeray's "The Rose and the Ring," on the other hand, the conventions of the fairytale are treated as somewhat ridiculous and thus as an opportunity for satire, parody and pantomime. It is striking, meanwhile, how cloying and sentimental the fairytale becomes in the hands of the normally ironic Oscar Wilde.⁴ Yet in each case what is clearly perceived by the reader is the author's interpretation of the fairy tale genre.

Unlike other authors of literary fairytales, however, MacDonald's view of the genre is more expansive, allowing him to include and move between irony, sentiment and morality without making one the

centre of gravity. Amy Billone argues that in his fairy tales “MacDonald forces readers to hover not only between innocence and experience but also between alternative methods of expression” (145). The obvious example here is “The Light Princess” in which MacDonald uses both the ironic tone of Thackeray and the sentimental tone of Hans Christian Anderson to unsettle the reader and cause them to hesitate between different interpretations. Moreover, this hesitation or wondering speculation is the precise effect that MacDonald intends for his fairy tales to have upon readers. In *Adela Cathcart*, the frame novel in which MacDonald placed three of his earliest fairytales, after the reading of “The Shadows” Adela and the company respond with wavering uncertainty:

“I must think. I don’t know. I can’t trust you.—I do believe, uncle, you write whatever comes into your head; and then when any one asks you the meaning of this or that, you hunt round till you find a meaning just about the same size as the thing itself, and stick it on.—Don’t you, now?”

“Perhaps *yes*, and perhaps *no*, and perhaps both,” I answered.

“You have the most confounded imagination I ever knew, Smith, my boy!” said the colonel. “You run right away, and leave me to come hobbling after as I best can. . . .”

No more remarks were made upon my Shadow story, though I was glad to see the curate pondering over it. (217)

John Smith refuses to give an authorial interpretation and instead insists that the individuals “come hobbling after” as best they can. MacDonald likewise refused to interpret his fairytales for people in his essay “The Fantastic Imagination” saying that “the best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself” (9).

Returning to Todorov’s genre distinctions, then, it seems as if MacDonald’s fairytales correspond to something akin to the fantastic and hence to the present tense. For Todorov the fantastic is a duration of uncertainty experienced by the reader in which they hesitate between different interpretations of the text, and as we have seen this is the effect that MacDonald strove to create in his Fairyland. Unlike Neverland which denies the present to preserve the future or Wonderland which uses the present as an opportunity to relive

the past, Fairyland revels in the present. Here, for example, is the opening description of Colin from “The Carasoyne”:

He was never at a loss when anything had to be done. Somehow, he always blundered into the straight road to his end, while another would be putting on his shoes to look for it. And yet all the time he was busiest working, he was busiest building castles in the air. I think the two ought always to go together. (189)

This is foreshadowing Colin’s adventures in Fairyland where in order to find the magic fairy wine so that he can save the little girl who then becomes his wife Colin must dream three days without sleeping, work three days without dreaming and then work and dream three days together. Each of these episodes forces Colin in different ways to be wholly engaged in the present with the result that he does not notice the passing of time—*chronos* is transformed into the fullness of *kairos* so that there is no room for either boredom or anxiety. Alice’s dream staves off boredom, but Colin’s dreaming (he listens to stories, presumably fairy tales) propels him to action.⁵ Peter Pan anxiously avoids work and all things associated with being grown-up—his “greatest pretend” is that he wants “always to be a little boy and to have fun” (*Plays*, 151)—whereas Colin’s work enables the completion of his quest and thus prepares the way for his marriage.

Indeed, in contrast to Wonderland and Neverland, Fairyland is not squeamish about romantic love or growing up. Even in the face of Ruskin criticizing “The Light Princess” as “too amorous throughout” on account of the “swimming scenes and love scenes” which would be “to many children seriously harmful” (qtd. in Knoepfelmacher 138), MacDonald remained steadfast in his vision of Fairyland as a place where present maturation (including sexual and emotional growth) was not only possible but more intense than in the everyday world. MacDonald as the father of eleven children knew much more keenly than the childless Carroll and Barrie that children who are not continually and actively growing are not healthy children. One of the key aspects of “the childlike” for MacDonald is precisely that they continue to grow. A child who is not growing, MacDonald would say, is not a true child.

The highest goal in Fairyland is thus to emulate Colin’s final task of working and dreaming together for it is only when the two are united that time is completely full of meaning, when being and becoming are joined in the present tense. Indirectly describing Sir Gibbie—a fairytale character who wandered into one of

his novels—MacDonald talks of the “the bliss of those—few at any moment on the earth—who do not ‘look before and after, and pine for what is not,’ but live in the holy carelessness of the eternal *now*” (7). This is why MacDonald’s fairytales never end with “happily ever after” (which finalizes interpretation and leaves the reader without any hermeneutical hesitation) but instead with the wondering speculation of Nycteris in “The History of Photogen and Nycteris”: “But who knows that, when we go out, we shall not go into a day as much greater than your day as your day is greater than my night?” (341). By making them hesitate and ponder the interpretation and implications of his story, MacDonald returns the reader to their own present tense, the only possible moment of transformation, rather than letting them “pine for what is not.” Fairyland is then able to exceed the boundaries of the story and come alive in the present lives of individuals. Unlike the midday Wonderland which exists in the past or the night-time Neverland which abides in futurity, Fairyland lives in the present. It is the twilight realm where past and future meet in an “eternal now.”

Conclusion

As we have seen, fantasy is a powerful and versatile vehicle for exploring and playing with human experiences of time, and the Victorians had a profound preoccupation with beguiling lazy time. Carroll, Barrie and MacDonald were three of the most celebrated writers of fantasy in the Victorian age, and their stories, far from being merely laden with “obsessive nostalgia for their own idealized childhoods” (Auerbach and Knoepflmacher 1) each are uniquely tuned to different chronological modalities. Wonderland, Neverland and Fairyland suggest that the delight of beguiling lazy time with fantasy is not just frivolous distraction or backward looking nostalgia; rather, fantasy is capable of expansive existential speculation on the relationship between *chronos* and *kairos*.

Endnotes

1. “Chronicity” is Frank Kermode’s neologism to describe this experience (46).
2. This chapter will not directly consider Looking-Glass World, though I believe the arguments related to Carroll could with a few modifications be extended to include this land. For MacDonald reference will only be made to his shorter fairy tales, that is, not to *The Princess* books (which never mention “Fairyland”) nor to *At the Back of the North Wind* (which treats fairies and time in a slightly different way).

3. “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).
4. Wilde’s fairytales, of course, are more complicated than this—as is everything with Wilde—but nonetheless the fairytale seems to be the one of the few places where Wilde at least partially dropped his ironic mask and indulged in powerful sentiments.
5. “He lay there, dreaming lovely cool dreams, till the world turned round, and was ready for him to get up again and do something” (204).

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