In His Name

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From Neverland to Simuland:

A Deleuzean Reading of Romantic Childhood and Self as Simulacra in Contemporary Postlapsarian Young-adult Fiction

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To Dr. Behzad Ghaderi Sohi

who taught me an impasse conceived

is an impasse conquered

Abstract

Simulacral portrayals of childhood in contemporary juvenile works of fiction, admittedly distant from Romantic ideals of transcendentalism, innocence and divine spirituality, still demonstrate characteristics that qualify them as immensely Romantic. The paradox can be traced back to the discrepancy between mainstream and peripheral views on childhood, exemplified, respectively, by canonical male poets, and women poets and fantasists of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The hierarchal structure of masculine Romanticism, adopted and reworked in works of classic fantastic tradition, relegates the child to an inferior position by legitimizing passivity and suspension of disbelief, so that the ascendency of the sublime self/godlike author can be affirmed. This standpoint is challenged by the insistence of the feminine trajectory on self-conscious involvement with the real world, and the foregrounding of the less ambitious ideals of responsibility, loyalty and friendship. The study is an attempt to substantiate the thesis that by replacing Platonist identitarian conceptions of the idea, with the Deleuzean differential mode, postlapsarian works of fiction manage to bring both viewpoints together. This is done through stylistic and thematic reterritorilizations whereby the Romantic myth of childhood is undone. Thematically, the introduction of themes such as death, sexuality, violence and disability, morally ambiguous retellings of ancient myths, and incongruous combinations of plot and characterization undermine the illusion of authenticity, origin and subjectivity. The effect is stylistically reinforced by the turn away from pure genres of fantasy and realism to the hybrid aesthetics of magical realism and realist fantasies, which subvert the conventional conceptions of fantasy and reality. The double perspective thus achieved, allows for the realization of the Deleuzean concept of difference and repetition, whereby Romantic ideals are affirmed not through essential reproduction, but via difference and the untimely power of the false.

Key Words:

Romantic myth of childhood, simulacra, reterritorialization, difference and repetition, postlapsarian young-adult fiction

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Introduction:

From Myth to Linearity and Beyond

The Frog: What would you have from the future? It could be anything you like.

The (Wind-up) Mouse: I don't want anything given to me. I want something taken away.

The Frog: What's that?

The (Wind-up) Mouse: Our key... We'd be better off if we were free to wind ourselves...

It's futile to dance in an endless circle that leads nowhere. [1]

[Slightly modified]

I

Perhaps it is weird to think of Classic children's literature in terms of wind-up toys; it is possible, however, to find affinities between the two: Both operate by clockwork mechanisms, endlessly going round in circles, traversing the same ground time and again; similarly, both have to be set on move by an external force, for none has any dynamism of its own. It follows that, at a certain point, children's literature, like the wind-up Mouse, tires of its unchanging course, desires to be self-winding and break away from the circular path. In fact, the desire to be self-winding and have the key taken away is not simply a narrative trope limited to a particular tale. In a wider context, it characterizes the general trend in contemporary children and young-adult literature as a genre.

This, however, is too strong a statement to be presently endorsed. After all, what justifies the relegation of imaginative nuances of classic children's narratives to clockwork mechanisms? What is meant by their lack of inherent dynamism? Or what evidence can substantiate the claim that contemporary works in the field take an alternative course? One way to explore the issue is to reconsider and, probably, modify the conventional methods of classification applied to works of fiction addressed to the young. Unlike adult literature, children's novels have been subject to strict categorization according to genres or kinds: fantasy story, realistic story, adventure,

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[1] Hoban, Russell. *The Mouse and His Child.* New York: Scholastic, 2001, 53.

domestic story, school story, animal/toy story, etc. The problem with this generic or thematic classification is that it obscures the deeper underlying pattern that is probably common to all members regardless of their respective genres. Maria Nikolajeva takes up the point and dismisses such a method of categorization as artificial and obsolete. Partly relying on Frye, she proposes an alternative mode of classification, offering an essentially mythic treatment of children's novels:

> My point of departure is the concept of literature as a symbolic depiction of a maturation process (initiation, rite of passage) rather than a strictly mimetic reflection of a concrete "reality". My next typology is based on the degree of accomplishment of initiation, grading from primary harmony (Arcadia, Paradise, Utopia, idyll) through different stages of departure toward either a successful or a failed mission, from childhood to adulthood. (*From Mythic to Linear* 1)

> [L]ike Frye, I locate literary texts in a continuum between pure myth and a total disintegration of mythical structures. … The texts … which I classify as utopian, correspond roughly to Frye's mythical mode; the texts treated as carnivalesque are categorized as romance to high mimetic in Frye's taxonomy, and texts which go under the heading of collapse [postlapsarian] are low mimetic and ironic. (ibid 3)

By adopting Frye's mythic cycle and mapping children's novels onto it, Nikolajeva is able to unearth a general trend that was obscured by traditional thematic mode of classification. Thus, prelapsarian (Arcadian) works of fiction, regardless of their genre, share an underling myth of childhood, which depicts the child as an image of purity, innocence, and imaginativeness. She traces the roots of such a myth to the Romantics:

> It is a commonplace to point out that before Romanticism, children were hardly believed to be different from adults; and certainly not thought to be better than adults.

> … Anglo-Saxon criticism tends to focus on Blake and Wordsworth as sources of the new concept of childhood. … The most essential issue is that childhood in the Romantic tradition is equal to idyll, while growing up is equal to loss of Paradise. … The idea of the child as innocent continues to influence children's fiction long after mainstream literature has abandoned the Romantic views. (ibid 3-4)

The claim that Romanticism in mainstream literature is a thing of the past, is what will be subsequently subject to further scrutiny; however, the legacy of Romanticism was, indeed, cherished and preserved in the golden age of children's literature in England (1863-1930), and was successfully worked out in classics such as *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *Peter Pan* (1902), *The Secret Garden* (1911), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), and *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), to name a few. Such works depict childhood as an unending stage of innocence and stability; the child is placed in a safe and autonomous paradise, securely fenced off from the surrounding chaos of the adult world; time seems to be going round in circles, rather than going forward, so as to indulge characters like Peter Pan who do not wish to depart Neverland or ever grow up. This cyclical notion of time also rules out the necessity of introducing agonizing notions such as sexuality and death. In cyclical mythic mode, time is reversible. Even if glimpses of the adult world and its attributes are allowed, it is only transitory. The child can always come back and find the window still open.

Thus, what is meant by the clockwork nature of prelapsarian works, regardless of their genre, is an inherent mythical structure at work in them. The overall pattern is almost always the same, while the details vary. In other words, characters such as Peter Pan are not willing to grow up, not simply to indulge the nostalgia of the author for whom childhood is irretrievably lost; rather, it is the overarching myth of (Romantic) childhood that decries such moves as illegitimate. Such narratives unfold, not as a result

of genuine interaction among characters, but according to the preset rules of the myth. The path, therefore, is predefined: no matter how original characters such as Peter Pan, Mary Lennox, Dickon, and Diamond seem, they are not much different from wind-up toys set to move round the unchanging course of the childhood myth.

Nikolajeva's objection to this mode of mythic writing is that it presents us with an image of the child that "has little to do with the real status of child and childhood" (ibid 4). In fact, she has a more positive view of "contemporary children's novels [that] successfully subvert this myth" (ibid). Her insistence on the subversion of childhood myth is due to irresolvable problems inherent in it: such works simultaneously aim at preserving the illusion of eternal childhood *and* socializing. They provide a fallacious image of childhood as unending and immutable; this poses no problem for the adult reader who has already taken the decisive step to adulthood, and for whom such texts are little more than tokens of the past; however, the child reader is forced to choose between two alternatives that are equally undesirable: she either has to "die or learn her alphabet" and speak the language of the adult. This is not fair play, of course. Therefore, Nikolajeva welcomes works that depart from the mythic pole and move towards the other end of the continuum, namely, the postlapsarian mode, characterized by a linear conception of time, and disintegration of the childhood myth.

Postlapsarian fiction, therefore, announces the "end of innocence", when childhood is over and adulthood will begin any moment. The introduction of violence, existential anxiety, death and sexuality distinguish this type from either the Arcadian or the carnivalesque mode. Thus, the newly coined term "young-adult" fiction is applied to refer to this new genre. Nikolajeva cites J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Robert Cormier's *I am the Cheese* (1977) as examples of contemporary young-adult fiction, and she tries to explain the *raison d'etre* of such works by quoting a

sentence from Anne Scott MacLeod: "Today's authors … presuppose an adult society so chaotic and untrustworthy that no child could move toward it with confidence" (ibid 129). "In young adult novels," adds Nikolajeva, "it sometimes seems as if the only way to deal with growing up is either through death or through self-denial" (ibid).

Nikolajeva's approach is preferable to the traditional generic method, in that it explains the general trend in children's literature, namely, the shift from mythic mode to linearity. However, her scheme does not go beyond the linear phase. Is disintegration of the myth of childhood the finale? Should young-adult fiction celebrate this state of abject entropy? Her method does, indeed, take the key away from the wind-up characters, but does not render them *self-winding*. They are passive in the face of chaos, content to accept what comes their way. What is missing, therefore, is a source of energy, intrinsic to characters, in order to stimulate a whole new process of myth-making. As Barthes says literature is essentially a "mantic" activity, whereby each man's existence is intricately tied to his imaginative vigor in redeeming significance from chaos.

Therefore, a further addition to Nikolajeva's postlapsarian type is the works of fiction that create a new myth of childhood; works that subordinate the linearity of chaos to a new sphere of myth. This should not be thought of as a regression to the original mythic mode; rather, creating new myths is like moving in a spiral structure. The new myth maker occupies the same locale in mythic cycle, but his standpoint is slightly higher than that of the former creator. In other words, the ground to be traversed is the same; what makes the difference is the point of view. Similarly, it is important not to subject these myths to evaluative judgments. There are no *good* or *bad* myths; neither are newer myths necessarily worthier than older ones. There is only a multiplicity that is ever becoming. Thus, Nikolajeva is right to describe contemporary

children and young-adult fiction as a site of disintegration of the Romantic myth of childhood; however, this is only half of the story, for every act of disintegration must be followed by a new process of creation. Similarly, although there is a sense of truth in MacLeod's depiction of modern society as chaotic and untrustworthy, Nikolajeva's contention that the only alternatives open to the child are either death or self-denial, is disputable. She seems to underestimate the power of imagination in refashioning the world and subordinating it to significance.

Nikolajeva's method, therefore, will probably benefit from the introduction of a mediatory concept that links the linear phase to a further mythic mode. However, before inquiring into the nature of this mediatory concept in the next section, it is helpful to go back to the wind-up Mouse and Frog, the fortune teller, if only for the sake of an analogy that will hopefully illuminate aspects of the aforementioned concept.

It will be remembered that the Mouse asked for his key to be taken away, so that he and his child do not have to go round endless circles. The Frog foretells that they will be granted what they desire. Before long, the pair are captured by a hawk, fall from his talons and become detached. The father and the son are now free to take whatever course they wish: the father walks forward as the son moves haltingly backwards. The Frog tells the mice:

> So it begins … for good or ill, you have come out into the world, and the world has taken notice. … Come, you have begun your journey and all else necessarily follows from that act … (48). You have broken the circle … and a straight line of great force emerges. Follow it (*The Mouse and His Child* 34).

II

In order to decipher the analogy, a bit of probing into philosophy seems to be inevitable; and as all western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, we should not be surprised to meet him on our way. [2] It is perhaps promising to begin with the familiar concept of "myth" and enquire into the source of the "great force", which is released when the circular structure is broken. It will be remembered, from the previous section, that the underlying pattern of prelapsarian (Arcadian) mode is essentially mythic, and that this overarching structure contains and controls characterization, plot, denouement and other features of the narrative. Characters act according to the delineations of the myth maker, and have no other chance of participation beyond the predefined rules. In other words, characters in myths have no identity of their own, but act under pseudo identities conferred on them by the mythic pattern. The question, then, is whose identity is original and genuine and whose derived, and on what basis.

It is helpful, perhaps, to turn to Plato's theory of Ideas, and investigate its structure. At first glance, the theory is hierarchal, with transcendent Ideas at the apex. Lower ranks are taken up by copies (*icons*), and simulacra (*phantasms*). Only ideal Ideas are real; that is, only ideas can lay claim to genuine (*a proiri*) identity, without this being mediated to them. The identities of lower ranks, however, are derived: they participate in Being to the degree that they reproduce or incorporate the original Idea. Thus, although copies and simulacra are both images of the transcendent Idea, they are distinguished on the ground of their greater or lesser similarity to the original model. Copies therefore, are more rightful claimants to Being than simulacra, which maintain the least internal semblance to the Idea, and are at best, distorted copies.

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[2] "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them." (Whitehead, N. Alfred. *Process and Reality.* New York: The Free Press, 1978.)

A second investigation, however, reveals narrow cracks in the structure of the hierarchy which may eventually bring it down. Granted that Ideas are transcendent to copies and simulacra, how is it possible to conceive of any relationship between the two levels that are different in *kind*? Or if such a relationship can be held, are the two levels really *different*? What if transcendence itself is a myth? Plato seems to have discovered the hidden cord that would collapse the whole structure if pulled:

> The model collapses into difference, while the copies disperse into the dissimilitude of the series which they interiorize, such that one can never say that the one is a copy and the other a model. (*Difference and Repetition* 128)

Ironically, leveling the model-copy hierarchy does not solve the problem, as it renders the relation of similitude untenable; for when transcendence as the legitimate source of identity is removed, models, copies and simulacra fall into the realm of immanence, where the only possible relation among them is pure difference (not difference mediated through identity). Plato seems to be musing on such a weird situation in *The Sophist*, where he sets out to haunt down the Sophist, so that the he can be distinguished from the true philosopher; in the end, however, the Sophist turns out to be not the opposite of the true philosopher, but simply its *other*; an "other" whose claim to participation in Being is as legitimate as is that of the true philosopher:

> Such is the ending of the *Sophist,* where we glimpse the possibility of the triumph of the simulacra. For Socrates distinguishes himself from the Sophist, but the Sophist does not distinguish himself from Socrates, placing the legitimacy of such a distinction in question. (ibid)

If the Sophist cannot be distinguished from Socrates, does it not follow that any claim to identity is unfounded? And if identities are imaginary, does is not mean than that any relation among models, copies and simulacra, be it opposition (negation) or

similarity, is also imaginary? An identitarian definition of Being, therefore, is inadequate, for identity itself has to be further grounded on another foundation that is the condition of being for identities and relations of similarity and negation.

Thus, Plato discovers the china-horse in his own theory, but is prudent enough not to face it directly. He faces a forced-choice dilemma: either he has to accept the differential basis of Being, and grant an equal right of participation to models, copies and simulacra, alike; or he has to content himself with the flawed theory of ideas that does not explain the relation between the two essentially different levels of the hierarchy. The first alternative is out of question, for Plato as a guardian of the State is anxious to distinguish between rightful claimants and fake ones – copies and simulacra – by measuring them against the Idea, so that certain qualities can be reserved for the selected few. Therefore, Platonism as a selective doctrine cannot afford to dispense with either the transcendent status of Ideas, or bonds of similitude. However, the second choice, as it is, is not appealing, either; it needs a stroke of Plato, the poet.

If philosophy's lame attempt to establish transcendence failed, poetry may have a more auspicious chance. Plato could not meet the challenge of pure difference and immanence. In spite of this tacit concession, however, he tried to nullify the effect of immanence by tying it to the pseudo transcendence of "myth". In other words, he invents "a transcendence that can be exercised and situated *within* the field of immanence itself" (Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* 137). Thus, myth, as an imaginary equivalent of mediation in Platonic dialectics, takes up the role of transcendence. It confers pseudo identities on entities according to which they can be distinguished and their claim to qualities can be judged:

> [M]yth … establishes a ground on which to base the difference, on which to measure
> the roles or claims… [The ground] is constituted by the myth as the principle of the test

or selection which imparts meaning to the method of division by fixing the degrees of an elective participation. (*DR* 61-62)

Therefore, Plato's sleight of hand in subordinating compromised immanence to pseudo transcendence renders his system immune to the challenge of simulacra. By introducing myth as the ground for negation, he subordinates difference to identity and is able to distinguish copies from simulacra. Now, he is able to transplant the mythopoeticized version of transcendence into philosophy and make the theory of Ideas even more cogent. Not only does it obliterate the philosophical problem, but also makes the distinction between copies and simulacra even more trenchant. The latter effect is of utmost significance to Plato, for the real goal of Platonic distinction is not to distinguish between the original and the derived, but between two kinds of images: copies (*icons*) and simulacra (*phantasms*):

> The model-copy distinction is there only in order to found and apply the copy-simulacra distinction, since the copies are selected, justified and saved in the name of the identity of the model and owing to their internal resemblance to this ideal model. The function of the notion of the model is not to oppose the world of images in its entirety but to select the good images, the icons which resemble from within, and eliminate the bad images or simulacra. Platonism as a whole is erected on the basis of this wish to hunt down the phantasms or simulacra which are identified with the Sophist himself, that devil, that insinuator or simulator, that always disguised and displaced false pretender. (ibid 127)

Plato's ingenious incorporation of ostensibly opposite notions of transcendence and immanence into the theory of Ideas is admirable; especially with regard to the chasm that subsequently develops between identitarian and differential philosophies. However, the fact remains that when he was to make the fundamental philosophical

decision regarding the ground for Being, his verdict was the subordination of "difference to the supposedly initial powers of the Same and the Similar, that of declaring difference unthinkable in itself and sending it, along with the simulacra, back to the bottomless ocean" (ibid).

III

It is time to take a second look at Nikolajeva's method in the light of Plato and his notion of myth. Nikolajeva's objection that myths in general, and the Romantic myth of childhood in particular, are restrictive, can be granted only if we, like Plato, subscribe to a "transcendentally-charged" notion of myth. It will be remembered, however, that Plato's move in uniting myth and transcendence was to substantiate his theory of Ideas; in other words, there is no transcendence *inherent* to myths; they are essentially creative productions, rather than means of evaluation. Therefore, it is wrong to hold the Romantics' ideas of childhood as "*the*" myth of childhood, and thus definitive. Every age composes its own myth of childhood, and the relation among these myths is dialectical rather than hierarchal.

Therefore, although Nikolajeva's call for disintegration of myths (the Romantic myth of childhood included) is legitimate, her method – regressing to linearity – is dubious. To annihilate ancient myths without making any attempt at re-fabrication leads to entropy. Myths are great sources of energy that is released when they are reworked. Man needs this rehabilitating energy if he is not to be debilitated into the Blakean Spectre, and is to remain *homo significant*. Thus, the shift from linear phase to an alternative mythic mode entails the double process of destruction and recreation, which may be brought together in the idea of simulation. Simulacra, therefore, are the missing mediatory concept whose inherent power of the false sets the domino pattern of creation, destruction and recreation, *ad infinitum*.