

The Language of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales – Compared with Earlier Tales

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Abstract. It is my aim in this article to outline some of the main characteristics of Hans Christian Andersen's language as used in the fairy tales. I shall concentrate on the earliest tales because this will allow me to focus on the radical linguistic departure from previous fairy tales that Andersen's early work in this genre represents. Even so, comparisons apply not only to other writers; one of the most illuminating comparisons is with Andersen's first attempt at fairy-tale writing, published in 1830.

Analysis of the language of fairy tales is a neglected research area, although there are obvious exceptions, such as Anna Moro's (2003) study of the language of Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti ovvero lo trattenimento de peccerille* (The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones, 1634-36),¹ also known as *Il Pentamerone* since it contains fifty tales, i.e. half of its model, Boccaccio's *Il Decameron* (The Decameron, c. 1351), and Anker Jensen's (1929) much older but very detailed examination of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales (in Danish). This should perhaps not come as a great surprise to us, for given the traditional distinction between folk and literary fairy tales (i.e. between *Volksmärchen* and *Kunstmärchen*), it may at first glance seem pointless to spend too much time on the language of folk fairy tales with their oral tradition and their lack of an original version in any meaningful sense.

However, this is not always a genuine distinction. It can certainly be argued that the so-called folk fairy tales acquire some of the characteristics of the literary fairy tales in the very process of being written down and published. The early Western European fairy-tale collections, such

¹ See Basile (2007).

as those by Basile, Perrault, Musäus and not least the brothers Grimm, clearly demonstrate that this is so. Each of these collectors cast the transmitted tales in their own individual language and style, and in the case of the Grimms the constant re-writing and hence new versions of already published tales serve to show the interaction between the language and the changing social and moral values that the brothers wanted to convey. In other words, the language of published folk fairy tales says more about the collector/writer than about any distant originator, even if such a person exists. Of course, that does not make the language in these tales uninteresting; on the contrary, it can give us valuable insight into the minds of the individual fairy-tale writers and into their time.

Nevertheless, it can be useful to distinguish between fairy tales that are based on tradition and oral transmission and *Kunstmärchen* that not only have a known author but have in fact been invented by him or her. Of these latter ones, Goethe's *Das Märchen* (The Fairy Tale) deserves its status as one of the first of its kind and certainly as the most famous and influential of the early *Kunstmärchen*. It was soon followed by tales by several of the German Romantic writers. They changed the nature of fairy tales, but did they also change the language in which these were traditionally couched, and what do we learn about their intended audience?

As far as the language is concerned, there is definitely a difference. The distinct style of a Novalis, a Tieck or a Hoffmann comes through very clearly. These texts are truly literary products compared with the folk fairy tales, though we should be careful not to over-emphasise this aspect. As I have argued, the published tales based on traditional folk fairy tales also bear the linguistic imprint of the individual collectors in question. This is clear in the crude and irreverent language of Basile's Neapolitan-based tales. Although separated by 'only' some sixty years, there is a world of difference between the form and phraseology of these tales and the subtle, detached and ironic language of Perrault, whose tales were intended for the sophisticated literary taste of the courtiers of Louis XIV and to which he added mock-erotic 'morals', sometimes even two different ones as in the case of 'La petite chaperon rouge' (Little Red Riding Hood). As a third example we have the increasingly didactic and pedagogical Biedermeier style adopted by the Grimms in their successive editions. All these tales are also examples of some kind of individual linguistic treatment, even if the writers take as their point of departure already existing traditional tales.

The second point – the intended audience – is bound up with the question of language. Many people may nowadays be under the impression that folk fairy tales (and fairy tales in general) are written for children – cf. how modern bookshops unflinchingly place them on the shelves with ‘children’s literature’ – but this is a serious misconception. It was not until well into the eighteenth century that fairy tales began to be written (mainly) for children, and that was for pedagogical reasons; before then they were unquestionably aimed at an adult readership. Nor should we be fooled by the titles of fairy-tale collections since there was often a discrepancy between the titles and the language/content in former times. We can see this in the case of Basile and Perrault, who both have references to children or young readers in their titles. Thus Basile’s alternative title ‘Entertainment for Little Ones’ suggests that children are his primary audience, but this cannot possibly be true when we consider either the language (see above) or the often frivolous and risqué content of the tales. Similarly, Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé* (Stories or Tales of the Past Times) has the alternative title ‘Les Contes de ma Mère l’Oye’ (Tales of Mother Goose), which again seems to imply a young audience, but this too is misleading as the style and the added morals are clearly aimed at the refined readership that gravitated to the royal court of the time, for whom others also supplied fairy tales (or *contes de fées*), such as Madame D’Aulnoy. The tales of *The Thousand-and-One Nights*, so popular in Western Europe after they had been translated into French by Antoine Galland between 1704-17, are not noted for their child-friendliness either.

Even when devices such as direct speech are used in these early collections of tales, the language is mostly stylised rather than individualised, just as the characters are overwhelmingly two-dimensional types. The Romantics may have wanted to promote the cult of childhood and the legacy of Rousseau, but this was not a feature of their language in the fairy tales. A cursory glance, for example, at Goethe’s *Das Märchen* (The Fairy Tale), Tieck’s *Der blonde Eckbert* (Eckbert the Fair) or any of Hoffmann’s sinister and gruesome tales will confirm that. Even the early tales published by the Grimms, though simpler in style in accordance with the oral tradition, do not display as many language features that are likely to appeal directly to children as we find in some of the later editions where the tales have been reworked and embellished (usually by Wilhelm Grimm).

A similar situation obtained in early nineteenth-century Denmark, which largely fell under the spell of the German Romantic movement.

Writers such as Adam Oehlenschläger, the most famous Danish Romantic writer and author of the play *Aladdin* which came to define the spirit of Romanticism in Denmark, translated German fairy tales into Danish and also wrote some of his own, as did the poet and historical novelist Bernhard Severin Ingemann and the learned Christian Molbech. At that time there was thus general agreement on the kind of language that was suitable for fairy tales – whether of the *Volksmärchen* or *Kunstmärchen* variety – when suddenly, in the mid-1830s, a new writer came along who did more than anyone else to transform the notion of what was acceptable in this area. His name was Hans Christian Andersen.

It was not that Andersen was averse to imitating his literary heroes. His first major publication, *A Walking Tour*,² is very Hoffmannesque in its odd whims and dream-like setting (on the night of New Year's Eve 1828-29), and at an early stage he was happy to copy whole chunks out of Shakespeare and Oehlenschläger. These juvenilia, which eventually won Andersen the state support that allowed him to attend a grammar school at the ripe age of seventeen, were full of pastiche, but beyond these imaginary imitations there was another voice in him beginning to break out. The first public display of this was the touching poem 'The Dying Child', written in 1826 (when he was twenty-one and still at the grammar school) and published in a newspaper in both a Danish and a German version. The poem's three 8-lined stanzas mark a radical departure from the way that the child was perceived in contemporary European literature. Even the cult of childhood that started with Rousseau and had been embraced by the German Romantics and exemplified in Goethe's ballad 'Erlkönig' went only so far. The fundamental perspective was still that of the adult world and the child's position within it, as 'Erlkönig' itself demonstrates with its duality: on the one hand the dialogue between father and son, on the other hand the Erlkönig's one-way address to the child. Andersen goes a crucial step further. In an earlier draft he had composed the poem as a dialogue between a mother and her dying child, but in the final version he altered this so that the whole poem consists of the speech of the increasingly feverish but strangely comforting child, calmly talking to the mother in the idiom of – yes, a child. This was a radical role reversal, the grown-up (the mother) is neither seen nor heard, and the grave

2 *Fodreise fra Holmens Canal til Østpynten af Amager i Aarene 1828 og 1829* (A Walking Tour from Holmen's Canal to the Eastern point of Amager in the Years 1828 and 1829).

subject of death is here presented exclusively from the viewpoint of the child. Although nine years elapsed between 'The Dying Child' and the first volume of fairy tales, Andersen never forgot this perspective which underlies many of his tales; the child that dare speak out and say the unsayable ('Men han har jo ikke noget paa', But he's got nothing on)³ at the end of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' is perhaps the most obvious example of this, but only one of them (cf. Andersen 2003 I: 181).

And yet, as I intimated earlier, there was a 'false start', because at the end of his book *Poems* in 1830 there appeared what was described as 'et fyensk Folke-Eventyr' (a folk tale from Funen, i.e. the island of Andersen's birth) entitled 'Dödningen' (The Dead Person). It came with the following short explanation by the author (in English translation):

As a child it was my greatest joy to listen to fairy tales, many of them are still quite fresh in my memory, and some of these are little or not at all known; I have here retold one, and in case it is received with approbation, I will deal with others, and at some point deliver a cycle of Danish folk fairy tales. (Andersen 2003 I: 52)

However, this attempt to 'test the market', as it were, was greeted with harsh criticism rather than with enthusiasm, and five years passed before his second attempt at this genre.

'The Dead Person' opens with a detailed description of the setting and the precise locality (on Funen) and an elaborate depiction of 'a beautiful August evening', complete with dancing elf girls and the elf king himself as well as other supernatural beings, such as an exorcised spirit that still haunts the neighbourhood. This is all rendered in a somewhat bombastic style and, at times, in a vocabulary that is far from elementary. No doubt it owes a lot to the interest in the night side of life and to aspects of the supernatural found in some of the German Romantics' works (though cf. also Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, 1743, and the many 'Gothic novels' in the late eighteenth century),⁴ but when Andersen came to publish his first two volumes of fairy tales in 1835, the transformation in language, style and idiom from 'The Dead Person' is astounding. In this

³ Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Andersen are my own.

⁴ The full title of Young's work is *The Complaint: or Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality*, first published in 1743. This was an important contribution to the growing eighteenth-century fascination with the night aspects of life and the notion of the 'sublime'.

‘new’ language Andersen shows his independence from his admired predecessors: Tieck, Hoffmann and Oehlenschläger.

Let us take an example. The opening sentence of ‘The Dead Person’ is symptomatic of Andersen’s language before he found his ‘true voice’. In English translation it reads as follows:

About five miles from Bogense [a small town on the island of Funen] one will find in a field in the vicinity of Elvedgaard a due to its size peculiar hawthorn, which may be seen even from the coast of Jutland. (Andersen 2003 I: 52)

The complex noun phrase here – ‘a due to its size peculiar hawthorn’ – incorporating a prepositional phrase between the indefinite article and the descriptive adjective, is typical of the Germanic academic style that Danish intellectuals eagerly adopted at the time, not least Andersen’s contemporary, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. But one would be hard pressed to find this kind of construction in Andersen’s later writings, particularly in the fairy tales. In fact, Andersen ‘rewrote’ ‘The Dead Person’ as ‘The Travelling Companion’, published in the second volume of fairy tales in 1835. Just to give a flavour of the radical change in Andersen’s language from five years previously, let me quote the opening paragraph of ‘The Travelling Companion’ (in English translation):

Poor Johannes was really sad because his father was very ill and couldn’t live on. There was no one else but the two of them in the small sitting-room; the lamp on the table was about to go out, and it was quite late in the evening. (Andersen 2003 I: 123)

We see here that instead of the initial, extensive description of the locality in ‘The Dead Person’, the beginning of ‘The Travelling Companion’ has been cut to the bone. Gone is the long introduction; instead, we are immediately introduced to the main character, Johannes (or John), and share his sadness. This first, short paragraph is followed by direct speech, namely the last words that the father utters to his son before he dies. In other words, unlike ‘The Dead Person’ this tale begins *in medias res* without any description of the surroundings and thus catches the attention of the reader (or child listener) from the start.

A more dramatic change from the earlier version is difficult to imagine, and if we look closely at the language, a few things spring to mind.

The vocabulary in this later version is very simple; there are no formal words, and the expression 'and could not live on' (*Dan.* 'og kunne ikke leve') has a special appeal to a young reader/listener.

We know what Andersen deliberately set out to do this the second time round, for in the run-up to the 1835 volume (in which three of the four tales are in fact rewritten folk fairy tales), he outlined his thoughts about the new departure in his writing career in letters to friends. For example, he says in a letter to the poet and novelist B. S. Ingemann:

Furthermore, I have begun some 'Fairy Tales, Told for Children', and I think I will succeed with them. I have rendered a few of the fairy tales that made me happy to listen to as a child and which I think are not known ...⁵

Significantly, he then adds, 'I have written them exactly as I myself would tell them *to a child*' (my emphasis). This is precisely what was missing in his comments about 'The Dead Person', where he only said that he had retold one but without stating in what way. As we saw, it was not in this way.

Even closer to publication, Andersen wrote to the German writer Adelbert von Chamisso (who both knew and translated from Danish): 'In these [i.e. the first four tales] I think I have expressed the childish element in a rather singular way.'⁶ So what Andersen brings to the fairy tales this time round is primarily two new things: the child's perspective and a new kind of language.

When Andersen came to write his last and most comprehensive (though not necessarily most reliable) autobiography *Mit Livs Eventyr* (The Story of My Life), he gives the following explanation of the early title: 'In order to put the readers in their rightful place I had ... given the first books the title Fairy Tales, Told for Children.' And he continues, 'I had put my short tales down on paper *in quite the same language and with the expressions in which I myself had orally told them to the little ones* and had realised that all age groups accepted this; the children mostly enjoyed what I would call the ornamental trappings, the older reader on the other hand was interested in the deeper meaning. The fairy tales

5 *Breve fra Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. C. S. A. Bille and Nikolai Bøgh, Vol. I., Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1878, (dated 10 February 1835) p. 292.

6 Cf. Poul Højbye, 'Chamisso, H. C. Andersen og andre danskere', *Anderseniana*, 1969: 400.

became reading for children and adults, which I think, in our time, is the task for the writer of fairy tales'⁷ (my emphasis).

As far as the perspective is concerned, Andersen gradually realised that his tales were being misinterpreted and thought of as stories for children only – something which is still a widespread view in many countries, including in the Anglo-Saxon world. At different stages in his life, Andersen commented on this failure to grasp the meaning of his tales fully. He himself was partly to blame for this 'misconception' by issuing each volume up to 1843 with the subtitle: 'Told for Children'. Only then did he quietly drop that epithet, but it is clear that he always had a 'double audience' of children and adults in mind; in other words, that his tales could be read and understood at different levels.

In a later comment in 1863 he elaborates his views on this as follows: 'One should in the style hear the narrator, the language therefore had to approach an oral account; the narration was for children, but the older person should also listen to it.' Here Andersen also admits that it was his ambition in 'The Dead Person' to imitate the tone found in the folk fairy tales published by Musäus in Germany in 1782-86.

The early shift in perspective towards a more 'child-friendly' style had a profound impact on Andersen's language. Out went the elaborate constructions and contorted sentences of 'The Dead Person' as well as the formal vocabulary. The sudden change in tone and technique as well as language may be illustrated in the very first tale of the first volume of fairy tales, viz. 'The Tinderbox', and many of the basic features in it soon established themselves as 'ground rules' for the following tales, including the frequent use of direct speech and the simplicity of language. Notice, for example, the very first sentence of this tale (in English translation):

A soldier came marching along the road: left, right! left, right! He had his knapsack on his back and a sword at his side, for he had been to war and now he was on his way home. (Andersen 2003 I: 79)

From a purely semantic point of view there is no need to add anything to the opening clause. We all know what marching sounds like; that is,

⁷ *Mit Livs Eventyr*, in: *H. C. Andersens samlede værker 17*, ed. Klaus P. Mortensen, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, Gyldendal, 2007, p. 266. This (third) autobiography was first published in 1855.

we adults do. To a child, however, the rhythm and sound of marching are brought home by the imaginary command 'left, right! left, right!' (*Dan.* 'Een, To! Een, To!', One, Two! One, Two!) and this helps to define the young man as a soldier, even though there is actually no one there to give the order.

There are several other onomatopoeic expressions in the text, all with a view to making the story lively and in order to appeal to children. For instance, when the soldier opens the first door down in the tree, he utters an involuntary 'Ooh' when he spots the big dog in the room. Or does he? There are no inverted commas around this exclamation, and it is more logical to see it as an example of free indirect speech in that we hear the soldier's reaction via the narrator's voice. This is a device that Andersen perfected in his fairy-tale language. When the soldier opens the second door, an 'Eeek!' is expressed, but by whom? And the sight of the third dog (the one with eyes as big as the round tower – in Copenhagen) generates a whole sentence: 'No, that was hideous!', but again without being marked as direct speech (unlike here) (Andersen 2003 I: 80).

Similar exclamations (introduced by interjections) are used to impart the thoughts or feelings of the soldier. There are also repetitions of simple words and extensive use of 'modal adverbs' (also known as 'discourse particles'), like the German equivalents 'da, doch, ja, nun, wohl', etc., which make the language more colloquial and add subtle nuances to the meaning, but which are very difficult to translate into many languages, certainly into English.⁸

Onomatopoeic expressions are by no means confined to 'The Tinderbox' and other early tales; they are general stock-in-trade elements of Andersen's tales. The same can be said of verse lines in many of the tales, such as the Danish-German elegiac couplet from 'The Swineherd' (1842):

Ach, Du lieber Augustin
 Alles ist væk, væk, væk
 (Oh, my dear Augustin
 All is gone, gone, gone); (Andersen 2003 I: 259-61)

the meaningless and virtually untranslatable (since it only exists as a rhyme)

8 For Danish modal adverbs see Lundskær-Nielsen and Holmes (2010: 401-402).

Snip snap snurre

Basselurre (Andersen 2003 I: 454-57)

from 'The Flax', followed by the definitive 'Visen er ude' (The song is done); or simply the resigned repetition 'forbi, forbi' (all gone, all gone) that runs as an echo through the ending of 'The Fir Tree' (1845) (Andersen 2003 I: 301).

In Andersen's first original tale, 'Den lille Idas Blomster' (Little Ida's Flowers, 1835), the perspective has shifted back to the child, as we saw it in 'The Dying Child', insofar as the protagonist is not an adult (soldier, smallholder or princess, respectively, as in the first three tales of the volume), but a young girl. The main theme of the tale is how to introduce a child to the concept of death. One approach, here taken by the student (who displays more than a passing resemblance to Andersen himself), is to appeal to the imagination and transfer the 'problem' to the dying flowers, telling Ida that 'the flowers have been to a ball during the night and therefore their heads are hanging down' (Andersen 2003 I: 100). His adversary – the literal-minded, bad-tempered counsellor (a representative of a caricatured aspect of the Enlightenment) – rejects 'the stupid imagination' as something that is harmful to children and deplores the student's views and general behaviour, but it is, of course, the student's insight that carries the day and persuades Ida to accept the flowers' present death (and future resurrection the following year). The reason for this outcome is that the student is tuned into the child's way of thinking and is able to establish an easy and trusting relationship with Ida. Although she asks the questions and accepts him as the more experienced and therefore more knowledgeable person, there is a natural bond between them, and the student is able to tap into the child's fertile imagination and through his imagery convince her of an aspect of life that the counsellor can neither comprehend nor formulate.

Of all Andersen's fairy tales, 'Little Ida's Flowers' comes nearest to representing a poetics of Andersen's instinctive and fundamental view of the fairy-tale genre. The core of this is that the traditional distinction between the child's world and the adult world is a false and unhelpful one. What counts – or should count – in life is the ability to preserve the essence of the child's natural perspective even beyond childhood and youth. This may manifest itself in an acute sensitivity to nature in general, but especially in a shift in one's outlook on life and its multitudinous

elements so that it never loses the wonder, the insight and curiosity of children since these are essential for possessing the true values in life. This can be exemplified in many of the other fairy tales, too, such as the emphasis on Johannes's goodness in 'Reisekammeraten' (The Travelling Companion, 1835), the condemnation of the preference of artificial artefacts over natural ones in both 'Svinedrengen' (The Swineherd, 1842) and 'Nattergalen' (The Nightingale, 1844) and perhaps most famously in the ending of 'Sneedronningen' (The Snow Queen, 1845) where Kay and Gerda are both children and grown-ups at the same time: 'There they sat together, adults and yet children, children in their hearts' (Andersen 2003 I: 329). It is also this innate power of intuitive and innocent childhood (combined with her unquestioned faith in God, which is a constant component in Andersen's child heroes and heroines) that gives Gerda her almost supernatural strength when faced with the wintry elements in front of the snow queen's palace, as expressed by the Finn woman to the reindeer:

I can't give her greater power than she already has. Don't you see how great it is? Don't you see how people and animals must serve her, how well she has advanced into the world on her bare feet. She mustn't learn the nature of her power from us; it lies in her heart and in the fact that she is a sweet, innocent child. (Andersen 2003 I: 325)

But to return to 'Little Ida's Flowers', what gives Ida confidence in the student is not so much his views as his presentation of them and his ability to communicate naturally with her at her own level. The first two pages or so of the tale, up to the counsellor's intervention, consists almost entirely of a dialogue between Ida and the student, with the majority of the lines spoken by the student. We notice that the student, as well as being able to use a vocabulary and idioms that Ida can understand and appreciate, also employs a stylistic device that was to become a hallmark of Andersen's style in the fairy tales, namely a pronounced paratactic syntax with long sentences – the term 'sentence' here refers to what is written between two full stops – but with few, if any, subordinate clauses in them. Instead of a linking subordinate conjunction, we often find main clause heaped upon main clause, separated from the previous one merely by a comma or a semicolon, or by a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but* or *for*. This adds urgency and almost breathless speed to the reading (and, as here, listening) process and marks the style as

simple, immediate, catching and alive. This may be seen (or heard!) in the student's account of butterflies:

Haven't you yourself seen the beautiful butterflies, the red, yellow and white ones, they look almost like flowers, and so they have been, they have sprung out from the stem high into the air and have then flapped the leaves as if they were small wings, and then they flew, and because they moved upwards very well, they were allowed to fly also in the daytime, they didn't have to go home and sit quietly on the stem, and then the leaves became real wings in the end. (Andersen 2003 I: 101)

You can only really read this fast and fluently. For that reason I have in the translation kept the flow of the original Danish text. This may be controversial, but in my view it is necessary. In virtually all modern English translations, such long sentences are chopped up into several shorter ones. That is no doubt in tune with modern English idiom, but if used in these cases, an important aspect of Andersen's style is lost. Presumably, it is done because it is felt that it would sound 'unnatural' in English to have long paratactic sequences, but so it did in Danish in the nineteenth century. And that is precisely the point: Andersen's language/style in the fairy tales is innovative and thus different from that of his contemporaries. That is what makes it special and what gives it its unmistakably colloquial flavour. If this is not recognised (and to a large extent followed) by translators of the tales, then the language becomes much blander than it should be.

Of course it is not possible within this confined space to give anything like an exhaustive account of Andersen's language; merely to mention and illustrate some of the most essential features. Of the minor characteristics, it is worth mentioning Andersen's frequent use of the verb 'hear', which appears as early as in 'The Tinderbox', when the narrator breaks in just before the denouement with the conversational expression '... ja nu skal vi faa at høre!' (well, now we shall hear) (Andersen 2003 I: 84), but it is echoed throughout the tales. This emphasis on 'hearing' helps to draw attention to the listening rather than the reading process, i.e. (again) to the child.

The child's perspective can further be seen in many similes and explanations which would be completely superfluous for adult readers. Among the countless examples of this, take for instance the beginning of 'The Little Mermaid', here rendered in Tiina Nunnally's translation:

Far out at sea the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass, but it's very deep, deeper than any anchor line can reach. Scores of church towers would have to be set on top of each other to reach from the bottom up to the surface of the water. Down there live the sea folk. (Wullschlager 2004: 67)

The words 'blue' and 'clear' need no further specification for adults, but here they are compared with well-known phenomena from everyday life (cornflower petals and glass, respectively), while the depth of the ocean is measured in the (inadequate) standard length of an anchor cable and the combined height of many church towers; all things that are familiar to children. A little later we are told that down in the deep '... the fish, big and small, flit through the branches *like the birds up here in the sky* (*ibid.*, 67; my emphasis). The adverb phrase 'up here' is symptomatic of the viewpoint not only of humans but of children in particular, as is the comparison between fish and birds.

And what about fairy-tale beginnings like these: 'See saa! nu begynde vi' (There now! Now we'll begin) (from 'The Snow Queen', 1845; Andersen 2003 I: 303) or the opening question: 'Har du hørt Historien om den gamle Gadeløgte?' (Have you heard the story about the old street lamp?) (from 'The Old Street Lamp', 1847; Andersen 2003 I: 387)? These examples of how you appeal directly to children rather than to adults could be expanded with many more and they form part of the tacit agreement and easy relationship between author and reader/listener. If you feel, as a child, that you are being addressed directly and you are given information about things that you recognise from your everyday life, you are far more likely to believe the less familiar things you are told about or confronted with. Earlier, we looked at the importance of carrying some central aspects of the child's viewpoint and values into adulthood, and as a writer of fairy tales it was essential for Andersen to be able to see the manifold topics he wrote about from different angles. That is, quite simply, the core of his uniqueness.

The last aspect of Andersen's language that must be mentioned here is one that seems to have escaped many non-Danish readers, namely the humour in the fairy tales.⁹ Ask almost any Danes who have read them,

9 The best treatment of the humour in Andersen's tales that I know of is Møllehave (1985), but as this is written in Danish, it is unlikely to convince or change the view of many foreign readers.

and they will tell you that Andersen is a humorous writer, but many foreign readers, i.e. people who have read him in translation, will disagree. Why? The most obvious answer is that this feature is difficult to convey in the translations, partly for the reasons given above. Andersen himself draws attention to this aspect of his tales in a diary entry for 4 June 1875, exactly two months before his death, which he ends by saying: ‘... the naïve elements were only part of my fairy tales ... the humour was actually the salt in them’ (cf. Andersen 2003 1: 20). The humour manifests itself in the tales in numerable ways which we cannot go into here, but much of it is due to the oblique angle from which Andersen expertly views life and all the creatures in it – whether they are humans, animals, plants or something else – and their interactions with each other. This often leads to incongruous and droll situations where some items act in accordance with their nature and others do not, without there being any particular logic to it. We saw examples of this in ‘Little Ida’s Flowers’, but throughout the tales such occurrences are legion, and the dialogues as well as the many instances of free indirect speech provide countless instances. Central to such manifestations of humour is the ‘secret’ contract between author and child readers/listeners referred to previously. In this way Andersen can often say what is inexpressible in any other context, and at the same time preserve a high degree of superficial innocence, which is yet another example of his ability to communicate in a multi-layered fashion to different audiences.

To sum up, it is my contention that Andersen broke new ground within the fairy-tale genre right from his earliest collection in 1835 and that one of the main causes, if not the key element, of this is his use of language. In this ‘new’ fairy-tale language there are many typical child-oriented features, such as sound imitations, repetitions, rhymes, introduction of sometimes unaesthetic everyday words, interventions by the narrator and the direct addressing of the (child) listener. Some of these appear more frequently in the early tales, but they are inextricably bound up with Andersen’s general fairy-tale style and are found throughout the fairy-tale production. Moreover, the pervading colloquial style, typified by frequent use of dialogue, free indirect speech and paratactic syntax, no doubt appeals to children by enlivening the text. All this is part and parcel of Andersen’s particular way of writing fairy tales and is used to reach his double audience of children and adults alike. As we saw, Andersen was acutely aware of addressing different audiences simultaneously. We can therefore conclude by saying that especially in his

early fairy tales an important element of the novelty in Andersen's approach was that he wrote not just *for* children but *to* children – as well as for adults – and at the time that was something revolutionary in the fairy-tale genre.

However, one difficulty remains. The more specialised and idiosyncratic the language is, the harder it is to translate it faithfully into other languages without losing too much, English being a notorious case. I would therefore claim that along with Shakespeare's plays, Goethe's poetry and Flaubert's novels (to name but three obvious examples) – but unlike, for instance, the tales by the Grimm brothers – Andersen's fairy tales can only be fully understood and appreciated when read in the original Danish. If one really wants to explore Andersen's language, this is the sad – given his worldwide audience – but nevertheless inescapable conclusion.

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