

Only connect

readings on
children's literature

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Only connect

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It was suggested to me when the Library of Congress did me the honour of asking me to address you that I should talk about how *Mary Poppins* came to be written. Now, I know that there are many people who can talk, and at great length, on subjects of which they are totally ignorant. But I'm not one of them. I can't speak of what I don't know and this is not from an excess of modesty but from lack of relevant data. Any work of fiction, any work of imagination, has inevitably something of the quality of poetry, or of those strange flashes of realization that happen for no apparent reason or rhyme—it can't be described. Words are like the notes on a piano, instruments of communication, not the poem—or the music—itself. Once a piece of work is finished, it has said all there is to be said. My instinct is always to whittle down, not to enlarge upon, and hasn't your own poet Randall Jarrell said—I forget the exact phrase for the moment—that a writer must remain silent about the way in which he writes? Even what he writes. Nothing, however, prevents a writer from speaking about the earth—the compost, as it were—from which his work arises. He can't help knowing something about that because it is, of course, his very self.

And this brings me to my title. I don't have to tell you where it comes from. When I was at Radcliffe last year students from that college and Harvard used to crowd into my small apartment once a week and the talk was so good, they were all so alive, so open to ideas, and so ready to fight me for them. I liked that. And I remember that on one occasion I said—and it

still seems to me true—that thinking was linking. At that, one marvellous girl blazed out at me, ‘Yes! Only connect!’ and began searching for pencil and paper. But I begged her not, for the life of her, to write it down in a notebook. E. M. Forster had made the connection already, and now it was really her own. Once you write things down you’ve lost them. They are simply dead words on dead paper.

But ‘Only connect’ was the exact phrase I had been leading up to and it has been precious to me ever since I read *Howards End*, of which it is the epigraph. Perhaps, indeed, it’s the theme of all Forster’s writing, the attempt to link a passionate scepticism with the desire for meaning, to find the human key to the inhuman world about us; to connect the individual with the community, the known with the unknown; to relate the past to the present and both to the future. Oh, it’s a marvellous phrase and I seized upon it for this lecture because—well, what else is there to seize upon? This question of linking is, anyway, very close to me, and since that is what I am talking about tonight inevitably I have to go back to the past.

You remember Blake’s ‘Little Black Boy’? ‘My mother bore me in the Southern wild.’ In that sense I was a little black boy, too, for I was born in the subtropics of Australia. Not that I spent all my life there, only my young years, and most of it far from cities. I lived a life that was at once new and old. The country was new and the land itself very old—the oldest in the world, geologists say, and in spite of all the brash pioneering atmosphere that still existed, even a child could sense the antiquity of it. We had also strong family traditions; we couldn’t escape them, caught as we were between the horns of an Irish father and a mother of Scottish and Irish descent. It was simple, not rich, not centred at all on possessions or the search for status symbols. It seems to me that there were few *things* of any kind—furniture, of course, clothes and food, all the modest necessities. But of toys, and personal treasures, very few. If we wanted them we had to invent them, not by

parental edict but from necessity. And there were few books: Dickens and Scott, of course, Shakespeare, Tennyson, and some of the Irish poets. I ate my way through these like a bookworm not because of any highbrow leanings but simply because they were books. But for the children, who as far as I can remember were seldom specially catered for, it was the grownup world that was important. There was a modest hodge-podge of good and bad: Beatrix Potter, simple—even babyish—comics, an odd book that nobody else seems ever to have heard of called *The Wallypug of Why*, Ethel Turner’s stories, *Alice*, Kingsley’s *Heroes*. Hawthorne I never met till I was grown up and it seems to me, as I read him now, though perhaps I wouldn’t have thought so then, that he rather talks down to children, ‘tinifying’, if I may coin the word, and inventing dear little curly haired daughters to make people like Midas more acceptable. Kingsley doesn’t do those things. He gives you the myths straight.

Then, too, we had something that no child could find today, not anywhere in the world. We had penny books. You could buy a fairy tale for a penny—that’s how their lore went into me. And just as good, perhaps even better at the age, you could buy a *Buffalo Bill*. I don’t know whether anybody in this audience remembers such books? Indeed, not long ago—for it seemed so unlikely—I began to wonder whether I hadn’t made them up. It was a great relief to me when Rosamond Lehmann, the novelist, assured me that I hadn’t. ‘Of course we had penny books,’ she said, and we dreamed over them together. Oh, why didn’t I keep them? What grownup, with no eye for the future, tossed the raggedy little morsels—as I myself have done since with many a child’s tattered paper treasure—into a nearby dust-bin? Last year, when I was in Toronto visiting the Osborne collection of children’s books that goes back to the seventeenth century, I eagerly searched the glass cases. ‘If only,’ I said, quite by chance, ‘I could see a penny book.’ A conspiratorial, Guy Fawkes sort of look passed between the librarians, and one hurried away and quickly came back with something held

the child's point of view—because to him it is strange and unknown—seems to be filled with glamour that his own dailiness lacks. One of them—Bella, or was it Bertha?—had a parrot-headed umbrella. This fascinated me. On days out, it swung besides Bella's furbelows—she was far more elegant, I then thought, than my mother—and was carefully put away in tissue paper on her return, while she told us the always fantastic story of what she had done and seen. Well, she never *quite* told—she did more, she hinted. 'Ah,' she would say, looking like Cassandra, 'if you could know what's happened to me cousin's brother-in-law!' But all too often, when prayed to continue, she would assure us, looking doomed and splendid, that the story was really beyond all telling and not for the ears of children. Oh, those inadequate ears of children! We were left to wonder, always mythologically—had he perhaps been chained to the mast because of someone's siren voice? Was his liver being slowly eaten by a baldheaded local eagle? Whatever they were, the things she didn't tell, they were always larger than life. Once, however, she spoke plain. 'I saw Paddy Liston in the gutter,' she said, 'and him as drunk as an English duke!' Well, what a sight for the inward eye! It filled out imagination to such an extent that now I can never think of our poor, probably sober, dukes without seeing them en masse under tables, robed and crowned and in the last stages of alcoholic dissolution. We didn't, as you see, need television! In a world where there are few possessions, where nobody answers questions, where nobody explains—I say this with joy not sorrow!—children must build life for themselves. One child is forced this way, one another. I went into imagination and poetry—perhaps I should more modestly say versifying—and never with grownup approbation. Come to that, I never sought it.

'Hardly W. B. Yeats,' said my father once, when my mother showed him a scrap of mine. And remembering it now I feel bound to agree with him, though at the age of seven it would have been hard even for Yeats to be W. B. Yeats. My father,

as you see, perhaps because he was so far away from her, was in love with Cathleen ni Houlihan. Nothing that Ireland did was wrong, nothing that other countries did was completely right. Even his maxims came from Ireland. 'Never put a baby in a drawer', was one of them. But who would ever do such a thing? Even if he saw a doll in a drawer, he would pluck it out, saying 'Remember Parnell!' We had never even *heard* of Parnell, and I had to wait to make the connection till I read a life of him a few years ago. Soon after he was born his mother, called away on some pretext, put him down quickly and came back to discover that her baby had disappeared. She looked everywhere, servants searched the house, gardeners rummaged in the shrubberies—no sign of Charles Stewart Parnell. I hope I'm not inventing it, but I think the police, too, were sent for. And while they were once more searching the nursery a mewling little sound came from the bureau. And there was Charles Stewart, six weeks old and at his last gasp because his mother, absent-mindedly dumping him into a open drawer had, also absent-mindedly, shut it! I am sure my father knew this story. Where else could the maxim have come from?

So you see, I was drenched in the Celtic twilight before I ever came to it. Indeed I only came to it when it was over and had practically turned into night. I had dreamed of it all my life, and although my father was long dead, I had to test what my childhood had taught me. So the first thing I did on arriving in England was to send a piece of writing to Æ (George Russell), who was then editor of *The Irish Statesman*. With all the hauteur of youth I deliberately sent no covering letter, just a stamped addressed envelope for return. And sure enough the stamped envelope came back, as I had fully expected it to do, but inside—instead of my manuscript—was a cheque for three guineas and a letter from Æ. It said 'If you have any more, please let me see them and if you are ever in Ireland let us meet.' So, you see, even if I hadn't been already going to Ireland I would have been off on the next train.

secretively behind her. She put it on the case before me and there was a *Buffalo Bill*—almost, it seemed, the very one, in the faded blacks and blues and reds that I had so long remembered. On the back of the cover was the advertisement for the two-and-sixpenny alarm clock that I had saved up for long ago but never quite achieved. And there, also—much more important—was the air rifle for nineteen-and-elevenpence that would kill an elephant at five yards. Alas, I never got that, either. What would I have done with it if I had, you may ask. I never had a moment's doubt about what I was saving for. It was to slay the enemies of Ireland! The sorrows of the 'most distressful country' got into me very early—how could it help doing so with my father's nostalgia for it continually feeding the imagination? My body ran about in the southern sunlight but my inner world had subtler colours, the greys and snows of England where Little Joe swept all the crossings and the numberless greens of Ireland which seemed to me to be inhabited solely by poets plucking harps, heroes lordily cutting off each other's heads, and veiled ladies sitting on the ground keening.

I think, perhaps, if there was any special virtue in my upbringing, it lay in the fact that my parents, both of them, were very allusive talkers. Neither of them ever read anything that didn't very quickly come out in conversation and from there pass into the family idiom. If my father discovered a poem he liked, even a piece of doggerel, it would presently be, as it were, on the breakfast table. Many a phrase, as ordinary to me then as the daily porridge, began its life, as I later learned, as a quotation from a poem or snatch from a ballad. As an instance, my father, who was a great lover of horses—and tricky, dangerous horses at that—would call out, whenever he returned from riding or driving, 'Bonnie George Campbell is home!' And my mother from somewhere in the house would always answer 'Thank God!' But *who* has come home, I used to wonder, for my father was neither George nor Campbell. It was not until

much later, when I began to read the Scottish ballads, that I understood. You remember it?

*Booted and saddled
And bridled rade he,
To hame cam' his guid horse
But never cam' he.*

For all Bonnie Georges that come safely home the Lord should, indeed, be praised.

'Oh, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms?' my mother would sometimes say to a weeping child. Who was this knight, I often wondered. And yet, when you come to think of it, all children are knights-at-arms at times, alone and palely loitering. It is then they need to be comforted. But sometimes my father would prevent that. 'No, no,' he would say, 'let her weep. You know we need the rain.' Thinking of this, with hindsight, I see how really antique that was, that we cannot really escape the myths, even if we wish to. You can call it, perhaps, sympathetic magic. And it is a fact that still, in countries suffering from drought, a cup of water is poured on the ground in the hope of bringing rain. In Sumeria, the oldest civilization the world knows, the rain god was invoked by the pouring of a cup of wine. I remembered this recently when a journalist, who had been talking to people in Ireland about the assassination of President Kennedy, told me that one old man said gravely, 'We cried the rain down for him that night.' What an epitaph! The rain cried down!

Then, too, there were maxims galore and proverbs and aphorisms. I was so often told—being a passionately lazy child—to 'Make an effort, Mrs Dombey', that I began to think that Dombey was one of my own names. How could I know it was out of Dickens?

Then there were other, closer, connections with myth. In those lucky days there was always help to be had in the house. Such people are wonderful meat for children. The life they live, from

That was how I came under the wing of Æ and got to know Yeats and the gifted people in their circle, all of whom cheerfully licked me into shape like a set of mother cats with a kitten. As you can imagine, this was blessing and far beyond my deserving. But I was not the only kitten; no young person was ever sent empty away, the riches were poured out upon all. It was strong meat, this first introduction to my father's country, among the poets and the makers of history. Perhaps it was just as well that my first contact with my Irish relatives should take me down several pegs. I needed it. They, I discovered, were not all in love with Cathleen ni Houlihan. Living cheek by jowl with her, they saw her without any trappings. Irish to the marrow, full of local lore and story, lovers of horses and the countryside, they weren't at all sure that life depended on poetry and they took the Celtic Renaissance with more than a grain of salt. 'I don't like you gallivanting around with men who see fairies,' said one. 'And the thought of you, a young girl, in Fleet Street, that terrible place—it's beyond thinking about!' From his description of it, I saw myself suffering nameless indignities at the hands of newspaper tycoons or being dragged up dark alleys by drunken reporters, and looked forward to it all with the greatest enthusiasm—though of course I didn't say so. 'And you'll meet such frightful people,' he said. 'There's one who lived down the road a way—old now, of course, but a terrible great boastful fellow. If you meet him, be courteous, but do not pursue the acquaintance. His name is Shaw, George Bernard Shaw.'

Gradually I learned to dissemble my enthusiasm for all that the elderly relatives of my father's generation found so reprehensible. One of them even remarked approvingly, 'You're not nearly so mad as you used to be.' Yet he was the one who, on his death-bed, hearing his wife asking the doctor if he was likely to last till next morning, remarked sardonically, 'I don't need to. I've seen plenty of mornings. All I want to know is, will I live to hear the result of the boat race?' Among last words this spartan, if eccentric, phrase deserves, I think, a place.

Not so mad as I used to be? Little did he know! It was coming back from visiting him that one of what he would have called my maddest moments occurred. I knew that on the way back to Dublin the train would pass Lough Gill. And I remembered that in Lough Gill lay Yeats's Lake Isle of Innisfree. So I leapt from the carriage and charged a boatman on the lapping shore to take me there.

'Ach, ther's no such place,' he said.

'Oh, but there is, I assure you. W. B. Yeats wrote about it.'

'And who would he be?'

I told him.

'Ah, I know them, those poets, always stravaiging through their minds, inventing outlandish things. *We* call it Rat Island! Well!

So we set out, under grey hovering clouds, with me in the bows and a young priest, who suddenly arose out of the earth, it seemed, joining us in the stern. At last, after a rough passage, there was Innisfree. No hive for the honeybee and no log cabin, but of course I hadn't expected them. They were only in the bee-loud glade of Yeats's stravaiging mind. But the whole island was covered with rowan trees, wearing their red berries like jewels, and the thought suddenly came to me—a most disastrous one, as it turned out—'I'll take back some branches to the poet.' In no time, for the island is diminutive, I had broken off pretty nearly every branch from the rowans and was staggering with them towards the boat. By now a strong wind had sprung up and the rain was falling and the lake was wild. Those Irish loughs beat up into a great sea very quickly. As we embarked, the waves seemed as high as the Statue of Liberty and I wished I'd had more swimming practice. Then I noticed, between one trough and the next, that the priest, pale as paper, was telling his beads with one hand and with the other plucking off my rowan berries and dropping them into the water. 'Ah, Father,' said the boatman, pulling stertorously on the oars, 'it's not the weight of a berry of two that will save us now.' He gave me

a reflective glance and I got the idea, remembering that in times of shipwreck women are notoriously unlucky, that he was planning to throw me overboard, if the worse came to worst. I wished I had a string of beads! However, perhaps because of the priest's prayers, we came at last safely to shore. I hurried through the rain with my burden and took the next train for Dublin. The other passengers edged away from my streaming garments as though I were some sort of ancient mariner. I should never have started this, I knew, but there is an unfortunate streak of obstinacy in me that would not let me stop. From Dublin station, through curtains of cloud—taxis did not exist for me in those days—I carried the great branches to Yeats's house in Merrion Square and stood there, with my hair like rats' tails, my tattered branches equally ratlike, looking like Birnam come to Dunsinane and wishing I was dead. I prayed, as I rang the bell, that Yeats would not open the door himself, but my prayer went unheard.

For an articulate man to be struck dumb is, you can imagine, rare. But struck dumb he was at the sight of me. In shame, I heard him cry a name into the dark beyond of the house and saw him hurriedly escape upstairs. Then the name came forward in human shape and took me gently, as though I were ill or lost or witless, down to the basement kitchen. There I was warmed and dried and given cocoa; the dreadful branches were taken away. I felt like someone who had died and was now contentedly on the other side, certain that nothing more could happen. In this dreamlike state, I was gathering myself to go—out the back way if possible—never to be seen again. But a maid came bustling kindly in and said—as though to someone still alive!—'The master will see you now.' I was horrified. This was the last straw. 'What for?' I wanted to know. 'Ah, then, you'll see. He has his ways.'

And so, up the stairs—or the seven-storey mountain—I went, and there he was in his room with the blue curtains.

'My canary has laid an egg!' he said and joyously led me to

the cages by the window. From there we went round the room together, I getting better every minute and he telling me which of his books he liked and how, when he got an idea for a poem—there was a long momentous pause here: he was always the bard, always filling the role of poet, not play-acting but knowing well the role's requirements and giving them their due. He never came into a room, he *entered* it; walking around his study was a ceremonial peregrination, wonderful to witness. 'When I get an idea for a poem,' he went on, oracularly, 'I take down one of my own books and read it and then I go on from there.' Moses explaining his tablets couldn't have moved me more. And so, serenely, we came to the end of the pilgrimage and I was just about to bid him good-bye, when I noticed on his desk a vase of water and in it one sprig of fruiting rowan. I glanced at him distrustfully. 'Was he teaching me a lesson?' I wondered, for at that age one cannot accept to be taught. But he wasn't; I knew it by the look on his face. He would do nothing so banal. He was not trying to enlighten me, and so I was enlightened and found a connection in the process. It needed only a sprig, said the lesson. And I learned, also, something about writing. The secret is to say less than you need. You don't want a forest, a leaf will do.

Next day, when I was lunching with Æ, he said to me, 'Yeats was very touched that you brought him a sprig of rowan from Innisfree.' So I had to tell him the whole story. You couldn't be untruthful with Æ. 'I hope,' he said slyly, 'when you go to Dunfanaghay'—his own favourite part of Ireland—'you won't cut down all the willows for me. What about the tree spirits? Remember the dryads! Dryads! I'd grown up on a diet of mythology and on Innisfree I'd forgotten it all. It was Æ who had to remind me, Æ whose thought was crystal—clear and hard—and still had room for dryads. These men—he, Yeats, James Stephens, and the rest—had aristocratic minds. For them, the world was not fragmented. An idea did not suddenly grow,

like Topsy, all alone and separate. For them, all things had antecedents, and long family trees. They saw nothing shameful or silly in myths and fairy stories, nor did they shovel them out of sight in some cupboard marked 'Only for Children'. They were always willing to concede that there were more things in heaven and earth than philosophy dreamed of. They allowed for the unknown. And, as you can imagine, I took great heart from this.

It was Æ who showed me how to look at and learn from one's own writing. 'Popkins,' he said once—he always called her just plain Popkins, whether deliberately mistaking the name or not, I never knew, his humour was always subtle—'Popkins, had she lived in another age, in the old times to which she certainly belongs, would undoubtedly have had long golden tresses, a wreath of flowers in one hand, and perhaps a spear in the other. Her eyes would have been like the sea, her nose comely, and on her feet winged sandals. But, this being Kali Yuga, as the Hindus call it—in our terms, the Iron Age—she comes in the habiliments most suited to it.'

Well, golden tresses and all that pretty paraphernalia didn't interest me; she could only be as she *was*. But that Æ could really know so much about it astonished me, that he should guess at her antecedents and genealogy when I hadn't thought of them myself—it put me on my mettle. I began to *read* the book. But it was only after many years that I realized what he meant, that she had come out of the same world as the fairy tales.

My childish love for the tales had continued in increase in me—Tolkien says somewhere that if you are natively attached to the fairy tales (lots of people are not and there's no blame in that), that habit grows on you as you grow older. And it has certainly grown on me. 'Only connect' comes strongly into this. Not long ago I read in the *New York Times* about how the eels from America and Europe make their way to the Sargasso Sea to mate and lay their eggs, the journey for American eels taking one year, for Europeans two. Afterwards, they make their

long way back to their respective homes and apparently feel, it was worth it. Well, for me the tales are a sort of Sargasso Sea and I am a kind of eel. And all these years of pondering on the fairy tale, first of all for love of it—because to learn about anything, it seems to me, you have to love it first—and later because I became enthralled by it, all this pondering has led me to believe that the true fairy tales (I'm not talking now about invented ones) come straight out of myth; they are, as it were, miniscule reaffirmations of myth, or perhaps the myth made accessible to the local folkly mind. In the nineteenth century, as you know, Andrew Lang and all his fellow pundits treated them as the meanderings of the primitive intelligence—and therefore, apparently, suitable for children! Then the anthropologists had a go at them and later they descended, if I may so put it, to the psychoanalysts. But none of these seem to have been able to exhaust their meaning; there is still plenty left. They're like the magic pitcher in the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon—you remember it retold in Hawthorne?—no matter how much milk you poured out, it was still full to the brim. This, of course, is where Jack's magic purse comes from; whenever you take out the last coin there is always another there.

Of course, you may ask—indeed, people are always asking—who invented the myths? And do you think they are true? Well, true? What is true? As far as I am concerned it doesn't matter tuppence if the incidents in the myths never happened. That does not make them any less true, for, indeed, in one way or another, they're happening all the time. You only have to open a newspaper to find them crowding into it. Life itself continually re-enacts them. Not long ago, staying with friends in Virginia, I watched from the terrace as two little girls of six and four performed the rite of burial over a dead bird. I guessed that they did not want to touch it, but they gathered all their grandfather's flowers and covered the body with them. Over these they laid branches and set a fence of sticks around them. Then they stood up and began to dance, not wildly, not gaily, not childishly,

but formally, with measured steps. After that they knelt down, one on either side of the grave—were they praying? I couldn't see—and then they leaned across the sticks and gravely embraced each other. They had never been to church or a funeral, never before seen anything dead, knew nothing about the rite they were enacting out of ancestral memory, and the whole performance was true. I don't insist that you make anything out of it, but it meant something to me—the assurance that the myths and rites run around in our blood; that when old drums beat we stamp our feet, if only metaphorically. Time and the past are getting at us. The Australian aborigines have a word for this. To any happening further back than a grandmother their memories cannot go, any event further forward than a grandson, they cannot pretend to envisage. Beyond these times, when knowing is relatively possible, they can only reach by speaking of what lies there as the Dreaming. 'It is gone into Dreaming,' they say of the past. 'It will come in the Dreaming,' they say of the future.

There is a wonderful Japanese phrase, used as a Zen koan, which says, 'Not created but summoned'. It seems to me that this is all that can be said of the myths, 'They are in the Dreaming. They are not created but summoned.' But it is the fairy tale, not the myth that is really my province. One might say that fairy tales are the myths fallen into time and locality. For instance, if this glass of water is myth and I drink it, the last drop—or the lees of the wine—is the fairy tale. The drop is the same stuff, all the essentials are there; it is small, but perfect. Not minimized, not to be made digestible for children. I think it is more and more realized that the fairy tales are not entertainments for children at all. In their primal state, that is. They've been bowdlerized and had the essentials removed in order not to frighten—but to my mind it is better not to tell them at all than to take out all the vital organs and leave only the skin. And what *isn't* frightening, after all? What *doesn't* carry a stern lesson? Even the nursery rhymes present us with

very difficult truths. And they, too, like the fairy tales, have long family trees, though it would not be easy, I admit, to prove it legally. Take Humpty Dumpty. All the King's horses and all the king's men couldn't put him together again. That some things are broken irrevocably, never to be whole again, is a hard truth and this is a good way of teaching it. Away back in Egypt, the myth was telling the same thing. You remember how, when the body of Osiris was cut up and scattered, his sister-wife Isis searched the world for the fourteen pieces, trying to re-member him and always unable to recover the fourteenth. I'm not trying here to suggest that whoever wrote 'Humpty Dumpty' had Isis and Osiris in mind. Of course not. I merely make the connection between them. And what about the cow that jumped over the moon? In Egypt the sky was always thought of as a cow, her body arching over the earth and her four legs standing firmly upon it. Again, it is I who make the link, not the writer of the rhyme. 'How many miles to Babylon?' What is that telling us, I wonder, with its three score and ten, the life of man? There is a gloss upon this rhyme that makes it perhaps a little clearer.

*How many miles to Babylon?
If it's three score and ten
Bury me under the cold gravestone
For my time is come, but make no moan,
I shall be back by candle-light—
Many times again!*

You may think this is hocus-pocus and mumbo-jumbo—and well it may be, except to me—but if you look in the Oxford dictionary, you will find that hocus-pocus itself derives from *hoc est corpus*—and we are, after all, talking here about the body, if I may so put it, of an idea. Mumbo-jumbo has, alas, no known derivation. It is a figure supposed to have been invented by African chiefs in order to keep their wives properly disciplined and to give them a sense of awe. As for fee fi fo fum, you

must go back to ancient Greece for that. It was the great incantation of the Erinyes, the triple furies born from the drops of blood of Cronus; and the old world rang with it as they pursued their prey. What a long and circuitous way it took before it found a home in our western nurseries!

You may, of course, feel that this is drawing a long bow. But, as I see it, what is a long bow for but to be drawn? And our phrase 'the long bow' itself comes from the great bow of Philoctetes, one of the Argonauts, who inherited it from Hercules. A man came to be a hero inwardly and outwardly to be able to draw that bow.

Or it may be that you will categorize all this as 'old wives' tales'. But I am one who believes in old wives' tales and that it is the proper function of old wives to tell tales. Old wives have the best stories in the world, and long memories. Why should we treat them with contempt? The tales have to be told in order that we may understand that in the long run, whatever it may be, every man must become the hero of his own story; his own fairy tale, if you like, a real fairy tale. Hans Andersen for me, in spite of the fact that he often used old material, is an inventor of fairy tales; so is Oscar Wilde. Their tales have an element of nostalgia in them, a devitalizing element that the true tale never has. Perhaps those that most clearly derive from myth, those that clearly show their antecedents, are the Greek stories, the Norse tales, and Grimms'. These are old trees, rooted in the folk, full of meaning and ritual; they retell the myths in terms that can be understood by unlettered people. For originally they were for the listener rather than the reader; they came long before books. Every one of these tales, it seems to me, is asking something of us, telling us something about life. Of course I am now on my hobby-horse and anyone who wishes may get up and shoot at me or at any rate ask a question. I am not here to stand and assert but to share my questioning with you.

Doesn't it seem to you, too, that there is more in the tales than meets the eye? Think of all those stories of the three

brothers who go off in search of various treasures. As a child, naturally, I thought of them as separate entities—the eldest so handsome, always delayed at the crossroads, or prevented from going farther because of some temptation. He's handsome and brave, and relying on this, he assures himself that when the time comes, he'll find the treasure. Then the second, sure of his cleverness, a cleverness that proves to be groundless, also fails in the quest. Lastly, the third brother sets out, realizing his ignorance, knowing himself a simpleton. And so he is. Simple and humble, willing to accept help from anyone who will give it. You'll remember the story of 'Puddocky', a prime example of this. I always loved that youngest son. Nowadays, however, I think of the brothers, not as single adventurers, but as three stages of one man. In the beginning he sets out bravely, young and handsome, and quickly gets to the end of that; but 'I'm still clever,' he thinks to himself; yet soon he finds even that's not true. He ends by knowing he knows nothing. And once he knows nothing he begins to know something, and from there it is really only a step to happy ever after.

The fairy tales also tell us a great deal about women—or perhaps about woman and her role in life, the triple role of maiden, mother, and crone. Each one of us, of course, begins as a maiden, and whether she becomes a physical mother or not makes no difference, the role of mother is the next step, the flowering of the bud. Last of all comes the grandmother—again, not the physical grandmother, but the stage where the flower withers into seed pod. To become a crone, it seems to me, is the last great hope of woman, supremely worth achieving. An old woman who remembers, who has gathered up all the threads of life and sits by the fire with her hands in her lap—not doing anything any more—what a marvellous thing! This is what it is to become wise. There you sit in your rocking-chair as in the fairy tales—I hope I shall, anyway—aware of all you have learned and garnered and having it available in case the young ones want it. You will not force it on them, but simply tell it.

That's what the crones—all those good and bad fairies—are doing in the tales.

Of course, it is not always easy to see the relation between the fairy tale and the myth. They do not *all* insist on telling you of their great-grandparents. But many of them have lineaments that loudly proclaim their breeding. Cinderella, for instance, whose story is so ancient that she is found in one guise or another in practically every mythology known to man. She has been grossly ill-treated, however, by writers of pantomime and by illustrators who retell the tales in terms of their own illustrations. Chop off a nose or leg, what does it matter? All tellers of the Cinderella story, ever since Perrault himself retold it, make the mistake of assuming that it is because she wishes that she goes to the ball. If that were so, wouldn't we all be married to princes? No, the wishing has much more behind it; it must be so if the happy ending is to be achieved. Grimms' comes near to the true theme. There, it is not because she wishes but because she has performed the necessary rites at her mother's grave, and because, above all, she has accepted her fate, that she meets the little benevolent bird who gives her the golden gown and all the magnificent rest. And then, the story has so many sisters. There is a book—the author's name is Cox—which has over 300 versions of the Cinderella story. But I like to make my own connections. Would you not say she was the girl in 'King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid'? Isn't she, as near as makes no matter, Patient Griselda? And who but Cinderella is Lear's Cordelia, with those two monstrous sisters? Going back to myth, you will find her in the garb of Sita, the prototype of all feminine virtue in the epic of the Ramayana, in India, which is as old as history.

And what about that recurrent theme where a character in the story agrees—for a price—to give the villain the first thing that runs to greet him on his return home? It's a wonderful story. You find it in 'The King of the Golden Mountain' and 'The Singing, Soaring Lark', and it goes back to Methuselah—

or at any rate the Old Testament, in the story of Jephthah's daughter. None of the true stories was born yesterday; they all come from far and have a long way yet to go. One that was dear to me as a child—I still think it most beautiful, even though others protest that it is brutal and bloody—was 'The Juniper Tree'. There is a wicked stepmother, of course, who, when the little stepson bends down to get an apple from a chest, drops the lid and cuts his head off. Even now I never bend over a chest without making quite sure that the top won't fall on me. And so the story goes from bad to worse. Sitting the body at the table, with the head balanced on top of it, she orders the little sister to call her brother to supper. Naturally, he does not answer, so the little sister gives him a shake and down falls the severed head. And now worse hurries on to worst. The stepmother cooks the child in a stew and gives this meal to the father when he comes home from work. 'Ah,' he exclaims, 'how truly delicious. I feel as though it were all mine.' As, indeed, of course, it is. Eventually the little watching bird puts all to rights, the little sister is freed of her supposed guilt, the little boy comes alive again, the stepmother—and serve her right!—is finished off with a millstone. It sounds, I admit, like a mess of horrors. But it never bothered me at all. Knowing the power of the little bird I never doubted that the boy would be safe. If, indeed, the father ate him, it was inevitable, even natural, that the boy would somehow, and in good time, return to his proper shape. After all, hadn't Cronus, the father of the gods, eaten up his children? Son after son was born to Rhea and each time Cronus said 'He'll supplant me!' and promptly swallowed him down. But with her last child Rhea grew cunning, swaddled a stone and gave it to her husband who, feeling—though erroneously—that it was all his, let it go the way of the others. Thus Zeus was saved to become king of the gods. And, once on his throne, he himself performed the same act—or an aspect of it—when he took his unborn son Dionysus into his own thigh—his mother

having been burnt to death—and at the full period of nine months brought him forth, unharmed and perfect.

And then there are the countless stories that warn against trying to see too much; of the demon lover who persuades the maiden to marry him on the understanding that she must never, once the night falls, attempt to look at him. And always the maiden—who could help it?—always the maiden fails. Either she is persuaded by her family as—again!—in the ‘Singing Soaring Lark’ and ‘Melusine’, or she is overcome by curiosity, as in ‘Cupid and Psyche’. And as a result he disappears or has to go through grave vicissitudes before he comes to himself once more. This theme comes directly out of myth; it goes back to the farthest limits of time when Semele, not knowing that her bridegroom was divine, yet suspecting it, begs him to grant her one boon, that she may see him in all his splendour. Reluctantly Zeus unveils himself and she, unable to endure the lightning, is herself turned to ash. The story is a warning, repeated down the centuries, through myth, folk and fairy tale, that it is dangerous to look upon the face of the god. Seek him rather with the inward eye.

‘Rumpelstiltskin’ was another of my favourites, for its meaning lay very close to me. Everyone knows the story of how the miller’s daughter, in order to become a queen, promises the little old man her first child if he will spin her straw into gold. Of course he does it. It is no problem. To him they are one and the same. But when the child is born she cannot bear to part with it and he agrees to let her off if she can discover his name. So for three days she tries this and she tries that, always unsuccessfully, and he warns her that when tomorrow comes he will take the child away. In despair, she sends riders far and wide, east of the sun and west of the moon. Only one comes back with a clue. ‘In the land where the wolf and the hare say good night to each other, I came upon an old man jumping up and down and singing, “My name is Rumpelstiltskin.”’ And so, the next day, making a great pretence of it, she asks the old

man ‘Is it Tom, is it Dick, is it Harry?’ ‘No!’ ‘Then is it Rumpelstiltskin?’ And with that he shrieks a great ‘Yes!’ and stamps his foot into the earth and tears himself in two. His name is known, therefore he is finished. This role has been played out.

This idea of the secrecy of the name, the taboo against making it known, goes back to man’s very early days, to the time, perhaps, when he had no name. During the war I spent two summers with the Navaho Indians, and when they gave me an Indian name they warned me that it would be bad luck both for me and the tribe if I ever disclosed it to anyone. And I never have. For one thing, I do not want to receive or give bad luck, and for another I have a strong atavistic feeling—one, I think, that is strongly shared by unlettered people all over the world—that to disclose one’s name, or take another’s before the time for it is ripe—well, it’s dangerous. I tremble inwardly and withdraw when my Christian name is seized before I have given it, and I have the same hesitancy about using that of another person. An Indian—or a gypsy—would understand this very well. It is very ancient taboo and I relate it—though I don’t suggest that anyone else relate it—to the earliest times when men built altars ‘To the Unknown God’. If I were ever to build an altar, I would put that inscription above it.

In making these connections, I do not want to assert or impose. But, in fact, all things are separate and fragmentary until man himself connects them, sometimes wrongly and sometimes rightly. As far as I am concerned, it is all a matter of hint and suggestion, something seen at the corner of the eye and linked with another thing, equally fleeting. You remember Walt Whitman’s poem, ‘On the Beach at Night’. ‘I give you the first suggestion, the problem, the indirection.’ Isn’t that wonderful? Turn your back on it and you’ll find it! It’s like Shakespeare’s ‘By indirection find direction out.’ And with these quotations I connect Swift’s dictum, ‘Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.’ Doesn’t this relate to the unknown name?

But now let me make one last link. I was rereading recently how Aeneas came to Campania—which is now Naples—seeking some means of getting into contact with the ghost of his father, Anchises. First, for piety, he prays at the temple of Apollo, begging the god to inspire the Cumaean Sybil, whose cave is at hand, to help him on his way to the underworld. Nearby is the great forest where lies the terrible Lake of Avernus over which no bird flies, and at the edge of that is the rift between the great rocks that guard the way to the realm of Pluto. You know the story. She tells him to break from one tree in the forest a small golden branch. With that in his hand he will be able to descend into the depths. So, holding the branch before him as an amulet, he begins the dreadful journey. Of course, the whole of Frazer's *Golden Bough* is about this branch and many of the fairy stories repeat it; 'The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces', for instance, where the twelve princesses are followed each night to the underworld by a soldier who breaks off a little golden branch to bring back as a sign that he has, indeed, been there. Not for nothing, I thought, as I read again of Aeneas, were those four sites so close together—the temple of Apollo, the cave of the Sybil, the Lake of Avernus, the Land of the Dead. It is inevitable that they should touch and interpenetrate each other, not only in myth, but in life. Life, in a sense, *is* myth, one might say; the one is a part of the other. In both of them, the good and the bad, the dangerous and the safe, live very close together. And I remembered, as I thought about this, how Aeneas had begged the Sybil to speak her oracle in words and not, as was her usual practice, to write it on leaves that would blow away. That struck a chord in me, for I knew a story where this had actually happened. In this story the wind blows leaves into the hands of two children. And on each leaf a message is written. One says 'Come' and the other 'Tonight'. Now the story I'm talking about is 'Halloween'. It is in *Mary Poppins in the Park*. And there is the Sybil obeying Aeneas by writing the oracle down on leaves!

And I thought I had invented it! There's a poem by Rupert Brooke, one verse of which says:

*There's wisdom in women, of more than they have known,
And thoughts go blowing through them, are wiser than their own.*

Truly, I had far wiser thoughts than my own when I wrote that story. You may remember—though why should you?—that it is about a party in the park where all the shadows are free. They go out to enjoy themselves and leave their owners at home. The only one whose shadow refuses to go without her is—guess!—Mary Poppins.

I find another connection here in the fact that tonight happens to be Halloween. In ancient times this used to be the festival of the dead. I think it was one of the Popes, Boniface IV, perhaps, in the seventh century, who decided to do away with all the pagan saturnalia and turn it from what it so significantly was, into a commemoration of the saints and martyrs. But in spite of him the myth never lost its mystery: men needed the festival rites for the dead; they needed to find a way out of grieving that would ease their fear that the spirits of the dead might come back to earth and haunt them. They put on masks and disguised their faces, wrapping themselves, to cheat the ghosts, in the garments of black that became for us, their late descendants, simply mourning clothes. The wake that the Irish hold for the dead is part of this ancient saturnalia. It gives an opportunity and a justification for the living to turn their faces again to life; it also provides a propitious moment, a ritual moment one could say, a kind of crack through which some element of the unknown can be brought into the known.

Is anyone thinking of saints and martyrs on this Halloween, I wonder? And who knows, when they leave this hall, that their shadows will be with them? For me the fairy tales are abroad tonight. Good fairies and demons, Beauty and the Beast—they are all knocking at the doors, rattling their money boxes and

holding out grubby hands for candy. It's a pagan festival still, be sure, swinging between trick and treat, angel and devil, yes and no. It is a night of ghosts and shadows, a night that links the past and the present, a night perhaps when that crack between known and unknown could open, and we could believe the old Greek poet, Aratus, when he declared: 'Full of Zeus are the cities, full of Zeus are the harbours, full of Zeus are all the ways of men.'

If it was true then, it is true always; time cannot change the timeless. It could be—could it not?—*this* city, full of lighted, grinning pumpkin faces; *that* harbour out on Chesapeake Bay; *we* men—if we could only connect. What do you think?

[1967]