

critical theory and children's literature edited by Perry Nodelman

The Hidden Meaning and the Inner Tale: Deconstruction and the Interpretation of Fairy Tales

by Perry Nodelman

According to many of the students I teach, the really important aspect of literary works is a mysterious entity called "the hidden meaning"—the central purpose of novels and poems, the ideas their writers were intending to communicate to us. Describing those ideas as "hidden" implies a bewildering paradox: that which writers want us to understand is the one thing they never actually say. If the meaning of a literary text is properly hidden, then the work might well mean almost anything—anything but what its words literally say. A poem which seems to be describing a bird in flight may be about God or death or love or war or the pain of adolescence, or it may be about some peculiar combination of all of them; the one certain fact is that it is not about a bird.

Many of my students think of meanings as being hidden simply because they haven't easily seen the ones that have been apparent to their teachers; what is actually hidden from them is not the meaning itself, but a clear explanation of how that meaning connects to and emerges from the words that signify it. The ability to provide such explanations is the essence of good communication; knowing they do in fact exist ought to persuade us of the fact that, given our knowledge of appropriate contexts for them, the meanings of literature are not hidden; texts do mean just what they say.

But then, of course, different contexts evoke different meanings from the same words. In different circumstances, the word "blue" can evoke the happiness of a cloudless day or the melancholy of a gloomy mood, and so the meanings that words are in fact able to convey in a surprisingly exact fashion may nevertheless seem different to some of us than they do to others. Because we have no choice but to understand language in terms of our own previous knowledge, meanings that may seem literal to some of us might well be hidden to others. And for that reason, there is a sense in which my students are not wrong to conceive of meanings as hidden.

Indeed, whether we are students or teachers or writers of criticism in academic journals like this one, we all tend to act as if meanings are, in an important sense, hidden. The mere fact of literary criticism, writing that purports to discuss the meaning and significance of other writing, presupposes that literature itself does not communicate clearly or successfully. That we need to provide our own words in order to tell other people what a poet's or novelist's words have communicated implies that the original words of the poem or novel have not clearly communicated what we understood them to say. Indeed, we tend to assume that our basic response to a work of literature should be an act of interpretation—that is, an attempt to see beyond the specific words we read to the meanings hidden within them. Like my students, even professional interpreters act as if the *important* meanings engendered by works of

literature are the one thing that the words of texts themselves never say.

Detailed discussion of specific works of literature with the main purpose of describing their significant meanings has been a central aspect of literary study only in this century—it certainly wasn't a practice of critics like Dr. Johnson or Coleridge. But if Jacques Derrida is right, the idea that the significant meanings of written texts exist somewhere separate from the written words themselves is a basic concept of Western civilization.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explores the ways in which our concepts of language depend on and imply the idea that writing itself is merely a poor container, a distorted representation both of reality and of thoughts about it. His basic purpose is to show that, if we logically explore what we know about the operations of language, we must reach the conclusion that all communication, indeed all thought, all consciousness, is a form of writing. We could not think or speak if we did not already have a system of signifiers related to each other structurally by their differences from each other, so writing as we usually understand it—visual symbols for sounds—is merely one specific form of that system of differences—and it is that system which Derrida identifies as writing. If all consciousness is writing, furthermore, then there is no consciousness of anything outside writing: "There is nothing outside of the text" (158). We may perhaps perceive what we identify as physical presences; but the instant we identify those presences as "a desk" or "the color red" or "cold" they become part of writing. Even the act of perception, of singling out objects as separate and therefore *different* from their backgrounds, is an act of writing.

According to Derrida, we disguise that from ourselves because of our conviction that writing is limited—that the fragmented ways in which it speaks are distortions of a truer and more integrated reality outside it. Logically speaking, that conviction is a deception. Linguistics has conventionally assumed that language consists of signifiers—specific sounds or markings that stand for something else, something *signified*. Derrida shows that each signified is itself a signifier of something else—just as the significance of each of the words in the dictionary is explained by other words, each of which is itself defined elsewhere in the dictionary, so that finally the meaning of each of the words depends on the existence of all of the others, and none of the words refers to anything except other words. Since each signified is itself a signifier, the system neither requires nor allows any insight into a world of concepts or objects or beings signified outside itself. As a result, to use Derrida's phrase, there is no "transcendental signified"—nothing which transcends language and is centrally and most significantly real.

According to Derrida, western thought is based on the

supposition of the transcendental signified that he challenges. It places a possibly real world, which is actually outside and beyond the purview of language and therefore not available to consciousness, at the center of language, *inside* of it, and sees its central truths as being hidden or veiled by language. Thus, physical reality, ideas, even God, are quite literally hidden meanings, the truths held by and distorted by the superficial inaccuracies of writing. Derrida's intention in pointing out the primacy of writing is to challenge the possibility of a transcendental signified in a way that might shift our understanding both of reality and of written texts. He severely undermines the idea that texts themselves contain a "transcendental signified," a hidden meaning that can be unveiled through the operations of an interpreter, and he forces us to become conscious of two important facts about them. The first is their inevitable connection with and dependence on other writing, their *intertextuality*. The second is their focus on the ways in which intertextuality prevents texts from achieving a separate wholeness or unity; because signifiers always imply and evoke all the things they are different from, texts always imply and evoke all the things they do not say.

Most specifically, as a large body of deconstructionist criticism has revealed, they undermine their own apparent meanings and intentions. As Jonathan Culler points out, it's ironic that a theory which set out to subvert the assumptions underlying acts of interpretation has itself been made into a version of interpretation. As it happens, that version of interpretation doesn't seem to be of particular value as a way of reading children's literature, simply because it's so easily done. As sophisticated experts reading a literature intended for an audience of inexperienced youngsters, most adults easily see beyond the apparent completeness of works of children's literature, easily see the ways in which these works deceptively manufacture a false view of an unconvincing world, easily find in these works what deconstructionists call "aporias"—those moments at which texts unravel and tend to imply the opposite of what they claim to be saying.

Deconstruction is not, however, an act of destruction. In seeing the degree to which the worlds constructed by literature are artificial, we can surely develop a deeper appreciation of their artifice. What more of us need to do is to deconstruct our assumption that children themselves should not be given the tools to see the artifice of these works, that it is somehow good for children to be innocent, that is, to believe in the transcendental signified of these clearly limited visions of reality. Derrida himself provides us with a way of surfacing and exploring such assumptions in *Of Grammatology*, in his discussion of how Rousseau developed an idea of childhood that paradoxically seems to privilege children by making them less than adults, more "natural" and therefore less human.

Derrida's ideas can be particularly useful for scholars of children's literature simply because they force us to consider all of our assumptions—not least of which are our assumptions about interpretation. As a number of recent books reveal, the ways in which we discuss fairy tales are particularly illuminated when viewed from the perspective provided by *Of Grammatology*.

The Outside is the Inside

Fairy tales are almost too obvious an example of what Derrida calls "the effacement of the signifier" (20)—the way our distrust of the words we read causes us to see them as mere containers of something more important, to the point of

making the words themselves disappear from our consciousness. In one way or another, almost everyone who discusses fairy tales disappears the tales themselves, the signifiers, and assumes that their real significance, the core of their inner truth, is something which in actual fact lies outside of them.

As we all know, fairy tales are written versions of stories once told orally. For folklorists, the most significant fact about such stories is that they can be told in many different ways. As A.K. Ramanujan says, "worldwide types, forms and motifs are reworked by a local (illiterate) teller into an uniquely patterned story. Both the pattern and motifs are seen as signifiers. Though the typical structures are common, the realized tale means different things in different cultures, times, and media" (260). Thus, stories are not only told differently, their meanings vary significantly from version to version. We can explore details of individual stories to develop an understanding of them; but we cannot expect to find any deep inner truths at the core of them. Individual tales have meanings; while tale types have the potential for many different meanings, it seems unlikely that they have any particular one of their own.

We can see that even by exploring the history of the written versions of a widely popular tale like "Little Red Riding Hood." Charles Perrault told it as a moral parable about the dangers of children not knowing enough, of being ignorant of the evil at large in the world: children foolish enough to talk to wolves get what they deserve. But the Grimm brothers told it as a parable about the inevitability of the ignorance of children, who need, not to learn of evil, but to accept their elders' wise counsel as protection against it. In these two versions, in other words, the story has the exact opposite meaning. As with all tales of this sort, the basic structure is capable of becoming many different tales with many different meanings; and those meanings are capable of many different interpretations.

That provides folklorists with an intriguingly paradoxical stance towards interpretation. In an article in *Cinderella: A Casebook*, Alan Dundes uses his knowledge of folk stories of the Cinderella type to present a psychoanalytical interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*; but after energetically arguing for the validity of his own interpretation, he insists that it is merely another version, in effect his own retelling of the story of *King Lear*. In a final footnote he says, "It cannot be stressed too strongly that a psychoanalytical reading of *King Lear* is my own interpretation of a play which has inspired dozens. Too often psychoanalytic critics give the impression that they believe their reading is *the* reading rather than *a* meaning of a literary text. The folkloristic and psychoanalytic perspectives utilized in this essay do not pretend to explicate all facts of the play" (244). For Dundes, the core of meaning he finds on the inside of the play is still acknowledged to be on the outside—he does not confuse *his* inner *Lear* with *the* inner *Lear*.

While other commentators would seem to agree with this eclectic position, the agreement is only apparent. Referring in *Grimm's Bad Girls and Bold Boys* to Max Lüthi's idea that fairy tales "typically appear before us sublimated and emptied of meaning," Ruth Bottigheimer says, "This condition makes them susceptible to 'filling' and coloring by interpreters in Christian, psychological, nationalist, feminist, Marxist, or anthropological hues," and claims "to avoid this as far as possible" (167). But apparently it isn't all that possible. Despite the objectivity Bottigheimer claims for her "content analysis" approach to the tales, she nevertheless discovers a "latent content" which she herself believes to be the truth inside the

tales and which suspiciously mirrors her own late twentieth-century values: a positive view of female power and potential which she claims to find underlying what she sees as the repressive nineteenth-century attitudes imposed on the tales by the Grimm brothers. Bottigheimer herself admits that she has “not excluded an interpretive component” (x), and justifies doing so in language that intriguingly duplicates the imagery of “filling”: to avoid doing so, she says, would leave her with “empty bits of information” (x).

Joyce Thomas also insists that all interpretations are limited, that “all such intellectual, theoretical translations—always interesting, frequently illuminating—can, however, never replace the tale’s own, most eloquent voice. That the humble *volks-marchen* should speak so many and such divergent responses suggests something of their eternal mystery and appeal. Despite all tamperings and interpretations, the tales survive . . .” (105). While this seems to agree with Dundes, it actually implies the opposite—not that all interpretations are equally possible, but that all pale in the light of the truth of the tale itself. Derrida would not be surprised that Thomas refers to that true thing outside or beyond the reach of written interpretations as a “voice,” as speech rather than writing: the keystone of the “logocentric” ideology he attacks is the idea that writing is but a pale imitation of speech. Furthermore, the failure of interpretation does not prevent Thomas herself from providing one, one that is clearly a hidden meaning, an idea of her own from the outside that she discovers on the inside. She identifies the truth of the tales as the Truth hidden within reality itself, “the unfamiliar asleep within the familiar, the magical hosed within the shell of the mundane . . . This is the world, the tales say, and it is truly marvellous, mysterious, wonder-full” (115). For Thomas, not only do the actual words of the tale become a deceptive shell, that shell itself then becomes a metaphor of our usual conceptions of reality. The world we usually perceive is but a symbol of something deeper, a signifier expressing and effaced by a deeper truth.

Bruno Bettelheim doesn’t even pretend to believe that the tales can be interpreted differently. For him, they express one clear truth. The fact that they emerge from an anonymous oral tradition prior to writing and to the expression of self that writing inevitably implies means that they can express something beyond the limited perceptions of any individual writer: because they were created in a variety of minds, they deal with “universal human problems” (6). As a neo-Freudian, Bettelheim defines such problems in psychoanalytic terms; and so, as Derrida might have predicted, he makes the outside the inside. He finds his own psychoanalytic theory on the inside of the tales, the central core that underlines them and makes them meaningful: “The fairy story communicates to the child an intuitive, subconscious understanding of his own nature and of what his future may hold if he develops his positive potentials . . . as symbols of psychological happenings or problems, these stories are quite true” (155). That means, of course, that they become true only by becoming “symbols” of something else, exteriors significant only because they signify a hidden interior. In making stories expressive of a hidden truth, Bettelheim effaces their signifiers and ignores the particularity of their surface.

Above all, he ignores the fact that the particular tales he discusses are not actually products of the general unconscious. Bettelheim assumes that the Grimm versions are authentic representations of the oral tradition; other commentators quite

rightly identify the meanings of these versions with the Grimms’ own time and place. Bottigheimer expresses annoyance that “until recently most nonscholarly and some scholarly Western European and American interpretations of *Grimms’ Tales* shared one basic premise, sometimes expressed, but usually assumed: namely, that fairy tales exist independently of the variables introduced by individual narrators” (15); instead, she insists that “both in plot and vocabulary this volume [the Grimm collection of 1812] reflects early nineteenth-century Central German bourgeois experiences and values” (4). In a more paranoid vein, John Ellis tries to show that the Grimms themselves deliberately fostered the misconception that their tales accurately represented the oral tradition, but that they actually made many changes, and that they “simply could not avoid changing the substance of the stories as well as their verbal fabric in tampering with them to so great an extent” (53). And in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes says that “the fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves. . . . They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them” (11).

Yet despite this insistence that these versions represent local values, these commentators also imply the existence of another tale, now hidden inside the corruptions of a retelling, that does speak deeper and more universal truths. I suggested earlier that Bottigheimer sees evidence of “a latent belief in the natural powers of women” (5), a more positive and more healthy, i.e., truer meaning still present underneath the bourgeois ideology that ascribed limited power to women which the Grimms imposed on the tales. Ellis insists that “the Grimms’ attempts to make the motivation of the tales clearer simply results in their narrowing down the possible range of explanations or motives . . .” (59) so that the tales become less evocative, i.e., less true: “the mysterious, magical and often threatening world of these tales is tamed and made more rational, predictable, and benevolent” (70). After getting angry at those who mystify the tales, Zipes then “mystifies” them himself by insisting that the “historical prescriptions” of bourgeois writers like Perrault and the Grimms are distortions of a saner, i.e., truer, folk tradition; in *Breaking the Magical Spell*, for instance, he speaks of “the imaginative motifs and symbolical elements of class conflict and rebellion in the pre-capitalist folk tales” (24).

These commentators deconstruct their own arguments: yes, the versions of the tales we know express the culture of a specific time and place; and yes, these versions also express (or hide under their distortions, but in a way that these critics themselves can interpret and unveil) a truer tale. This truer tale can be read even though it cannot be read.

This sort of contradiction is particularly apparent in what is certainly the most stimulating and persuasive of recent works on fairy tales, Maria Tatar’s *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. Like Ellis, Bottigheimer and Zipes, Tatar convincingly repudiates the idea that the Grimm tales express eternal verities: “Wilhelm Grimm felt obliged to stamp the tales’ actors with his own character judgements and thus shaped his readers’ view of them” (30). Yet she also insists that the tales she discusses, translations of the same Grimm versions that reveal Wilhelm’s prejudices, “offer collective truths, realities that transcend individual experience and that have stood the test of time” (xv-xvi). For Tatar, the tales are clearly deceptive

signifiers masking a truer inside: "Beneath all the variations in its verbal realization the basic form still shines through" (xvii).

Tatar expresses deep scorn about "the ways in which critics strain to find messages appropriate to children" (164) in fairy tales; since I am myself one of the critics she specifically expresses scorn for, I'm delighted to report that she herself quite baldly states what many of the other commentators discussed here pretend to deny: "to search for the hidden meaning of the Grimms' fairy tales," she says, "is therefore not so fatuous an exercise as some would have us believe" (38). Nor, despite her scorn for the "sophistry" of critics like me, does she herself hesitate to search; a few pages after complaining about my statement that "The Golden Bird" is "a profound praise of placidity," she herself "strains to find messages appropriate to children" as she insists that "Bluebeard" "displays a special capacity to magnify and dramatize the most profoundly disturbing facts and fantasies of a child's mental world" (169). I suspect my own view of "The Golden Bird" has more in common with Tatar's persuasive reading of the structural oddities of fairy tales than with this unpersuasive assertion that the tales express concerns of particular relevance to children.

But just as Bottigheimer finds her own faith in female power and Zipes his own Marxist philosophy inside the tales, Tatar finds her own interests there also. Her stimulating and highly evocative readings combine elements from psychoanalysis, structuralism, and folklore in a highly rewarding way, and I strongly recommend them. But even while I do so, I have to add the obvious fact that they are persuasive because they are highly individual, in a way which suggests that the inner truth of fairy tales, as is usually the case in interpretation, is actually the essence of the interpreter's view of life.

There are three possible reasons that I find Tatar's interpretations so persuasive. The first is that her own individual view of life and way of reading literature are similar to my own. The second is that the tales I am most familiar with are the same versions by the Grimms in which Tatar actually does find the meanings that she claims are central to all fairy tales and therefore separate from the ideological impositions of the Grimms. Both of these seem possible, although they would imply a far more local significance to both the meanings of the tales and to her interpretations of them than Tatar herself might wish. More important, both are far more possible than the third possibility—that what Tatar exports from the exterior actually is resident within and beneath the surface of the tales themselves.

The Priority of What's Prior

The various commentators I've discussed all believe that the truths they find inside folk tales are there because the tales existed in the oral tradition prior to their written versions. They therefore share the quality of essential truth that we assume to be the essence of God's own voice speaking: "In the beginning was the Word." Earlier I misrepresented Derrida by quoting him out of context: he spoke not just of "the effacement of the signifier" but specifically of "the effacement of the signifier in the voice" (2). We are convinced that the spoken word is truer than the written word because it is closer to the source—prior to writing. As Derrida says, "Thus, within this epoch, reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the

logos" (14). Being oral, the oral tales represent not only something outside of writing, and therefore less distorted, truer than the distorted versions recorded in writing by Perrault or the Grimms, but also, something prior to writing, and thus purer, closer to a less socialized and therefore superior essence. Bettelheim sees the oral tales as expressive of an unconscious that not only underlies but precedes the development of individual egos, Zipes as expressive of a pre-literate, pre-bourgeois vision of communality that precedes the celebration of individual integrity and power found in later written versions. For Thomas and Tatar and Bottigheimer, similarly, oral tales speak whatever each of them sees as truth because they precede the distorted special pleading of later written versions and interpretations.

The insistence that prior is truer is so basic a characteristic of our thought that these commentators often feel the need to invent history in order to support their points of view. Most obviously, all of them have actually invented the theoretically purer oral tales they unearth from the bowels of the Perrault and Grimm versions; they are free to imagine whatever they want of such "authentic" oral versions, simply because such version are by definition unrecorded and therefore unknown to history.

More specifically, Bettelheim insists that even though the Grimm's version of "Little Red Riding Hood" was published more than a century after Perrault's it is nevertheless the one that best represents the true folk tradition—it must be prior, for it is more expressive of the deep truths he wants to find hidden within the tale. Whereas the Grimm version "externalizes the inner processes of the pubertal child" (177), "Perrault wanted not only to entertain his audience, but to teach a specific moral lesson with each of his tales. So it is understandable that he changed them accordingly. Unfortunately, in doing so, he robbed his fairy stories of much of their meaning" (168). Similarly, Zipes, who wants to show in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* that both Perrault and Grimm distort the more positive values of an earlier peasant tradition, insists that a tale containing elements he approves of and which was not recorded until 1885 actually represents the oral tradition prior to Perrault's telling in 1697. By the time Zipes writes "A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations," he blithely reprints the 1885 tale as "the oral tale as it was probably disseminated in the French countryside during the late Middle Ages before Perrault refined and polished it" (228); an accompanying footnote refers readers only to Zipes's own earlier discussion, and doesn't mention the 1885 origin of this supposedly medieval version.

A little less deceptively, both Ellis and Tatar assume that versions of the tales which the Grimms sent to Clemens Brentano prior to publication of the first edition of their tales in 1812 represent more accurately than anything else what they had originally heard from their informants. Tatar calls these "the original drafts" (8), and Ellis says that "the extent of the differences is sufficient to give a clear idea of the nature of the changes made by the brothers, regardless of any they may have made before passing the manuscripts to Brentano" (38). The extreme brevity of these versions might well suggest that they are merely synopses; since Brentano had asked for story ideas, there was no reason for the Grimms to send him complete tales. But these versions are sparse enough to support the idea that the Grimms added immensely to the tales, so once again,

prior becomes truer. Ellis and Tatar both support their arguments by focusing on the way Wilhelm Grimm changed the tales from edition to edition; neither considers the surely very real possibility that the changes might represent different versions of the tale that he may have heard or been told of in the meantime, and it's hard to believe that he himself actually invented details such as the stepsisters cutting off their toes and heels in Cinderella, as Ellis seems to suggest.

While Bottigheimer is a little less obvious in her prioritizations, she does imply that tales containing powerful women represent earlier and truer versions. She says of three similar tales about many brothers and one sister, "Their narrative similarity notwithstanding, the three tales differ in that they progressively weaken the figure of the sister . . . The many modifications of the figure of the independent princess as she appears in "The Twelve Brothers" result in the personally ineffectual little sister in "The Six Swans" (37, 39). In three other tales, furthermore, "the power of the [female] conjurer . . . appears in progressively attenuated form" (45). Bottigheimer presents no factual evidence to suggest that the "weakened" or "attenuated" tales come later in time than the stronger ones; she cleverly suggests priority without actually making any case for it.

Deconstruction and Children

In demonstrating how all these commentators play the game of disappearing the signifier, Derrida's insights reveal not only the extent to which the claims they make for their interpretations are invalid, but also, curiously, just where the positive value of their interpretations might actually reside. Joyce Thomas expresses a common attitude of children's literature specialists when she dismisses all interpretations as "cacophonous babble" that inevitably misrepresents the tales' "own, most eloquent voice" (105); Derrida's deconstructionist approach suggests that they probably have no such voice, that what Thomas identifies as that voice is just another part of the babble, and that the "babble" is as much truth as human beings can hope to hear. As folkloristic research reveals to us, there is no such thing as an "authentic" folk tale. All tales are merely versions, all versions are equal to each other if not in value then at least in authenticity; and in a very real sense, then, the interpretations provided by commentators are also merely versions, new ways of telling the same old story. Bettelheim's complex Freudian analyses hardly express the real truth of the tales; but for anyone pleased by the elegant logic of Freudian thought, they are extraordinarily powerful stories in their own right, versions as delightful and thought-provoking as those by Grimm.

And if interpretations are merely new versions, it is only because all versions are merely interpretations. We too often use our conviction of the authenticity of the Grimm versions as a weapon to attack the inadequacies of versions we like less; we say that the trouble with the Disney movie versions or with supermarket pop-up versions is their inauthenticity, their distance from oral sources. Bettelheim, for instance, insists that "the true meaning and impact of a fairy tale can be appreciated, its enchantment can be experienced, only from the story in its original form" (19). Once we realized that there is no original form, no form with priority, then we must learn to be more honest, and to attack versions we dislike on more legitimate grounds: our lack of agreement with the values they consciously or unconsciously espouse and express. Disney fails to the degree to which he successfully and authentically conveys contemporary mainstream North-American values, not the degree to which he varies from a presumed authentic original.

Our faith in the authenticity of such originals has yet wider implications. Derrida says, "Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other . . . the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity" (244). Derrida suggests that this is a dangerously self-abusing privileging of the prior and more primitive by those who see themselves as coming after and thus, degenerated from, a state of innocence. Specialists in children's literature often view childhood as this sort of "other." Our common clichés about the ways in which children are close to nature or to God, about how their ignorance is really a saving innocence, disguise a profound distrust for the realities of life as we must view it as adults—and perhaps most significantly, a nostalgia for that which never was. For as Derrida shows, there never was an "other"—never anything before writing, never a prior, truer mode of speaking or thinking except the ones we invent as a means of belittling our adult selves; and similarly, there surely never was a childhood, in the sense of something surer and safer and happier than the world we perceive as adults. In privileging childhood as this sort of "other," we misrepresent and belittle what we are; more significantly, we belittle childhood and allow ourselves to ignore our actual knowledge of real children. For while all that we see as "other" may appear to be privileged, it is so only at the expense of becoming inhuman, marginalized, actually insignificant. To express nostalgia for a childhood we no longer share is to deny the actual significance and humanity of children.

If children are different from adults, it's not because they are wiser, but merely because they are less experienced. Our obligation is not to deprive them of our knowledge in the faith that their ignorance represents a wonderful otherness, a priority, a closeness to truth and nature and even God. It is to allow them to know as much as possible about the only reality that actually matters—the world that they share with us.

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