EDUCATION FOR WONDER

By ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

ONCE UPON A TIME there was . . . a king, a tailor, a younger son'. The traditional opening to fairy tales introduces the hearer into an ancient world, which might seem to have little appeal to children of this century.

Not long ago, the children's programme on british television, 'Blue Peter', set its viewers a competition in story-writing. The organizers were astonished to find that the majority of children sent in stories peopled by witches, dragons, princes and princesses. Yet the kind of story material which is constantly thrust under the noses of these children on news-stands, or even in the school library, is usually either of the realistic kind, or which deals with people and places familiar to them, or a kind of junior science-fiction, certainly mythological, but in a style which betrays the authors' or illustrators' alienation from the roots of genuine mythology, even of the 'tough' type required. It would take something more than the results of one competition to establish the extent of childish loyalty in our society to the traditional mythology, but the results are interesting. Infant teachers also can testify that young children listen to fairy tales as eagerly as ever, but are quick to detect and reject the phoney ones – the pretty-tied-up tale designed to entertain the young, lacking the essential seriousness of genuine mythology which is confident of its own respectable status, even when it is being funny or frankly fantastical.

Both this rejection of the phoney, and the fact that adult writers and publishers consider that precisely this 'phoney stuff' is what children want, shows something about our culture. The sense of wonder is part of the religious sense. If the children are to be trusted, it is 'natural' to man, but it is a considerable danger to our type of society, which has therefore taken steps to deal with it. For as the children grow, most of them learn to reject fairy-tales as childish and trivial. The alternative mythology they often adopt is equally divorced from reality, but pretends to it by the use of pseudo-scientific concepts. For this alternative – the mythology of ruthless supermen dashing through space with ray-guns and battling with green robots – is acceptable to our society because it plays down certain elements which threaten, if acknowledged, to undermine the ethos of our society. Although equally violent and cruel on occasion, the older

tales of many nations contain elements of humour (sometimes rather sick humour), tenderness, beauty, and a characteristic combination of humility and shrewdness, which have to be banished from the modern ones if they are to be compatible with the ethical values drummed into the young at school, at home, in every advertisement – even the jobs columns – and shop window.

The basic ethical principle on which our society is founded is that what matters is personal usefulness leading to material success of a measurable kind, whether financial, political, or professional. To this our educational system is geared, for the training in artistic and literary sensibility, altruistic and social concern, etc., which some schools attempt, is rendered virtually powerless because such training is, and is seen to be, an 'extra', to be added to the basic essentials if there is time or interest left. It is this fundamental ethical direction which makes it possible – indeed natural – to accept easy abortion, and the relegation of the retarded, deformed or senile to isolated institutions, until such time as public opinion has been rationalized to the point of accepting their 'disposal' as necessary and sensible. The unborn and the feeble are not capable of usefulness and success in the only sense recognized by our society, so that their elimination is reasonable. This is only one aspect of the situation, though it is perhaps the most shocking to christians; but even that is perhaps because we have ourselves become acclimatized to aspects of it which are less obviously destructive. For the arguments that support abortion, euthanasia and genetic planning are not the result of cruelty, but of taking it for granted that competition for success is the basic human motive. Without this motive, our economy could not function; which is why so many regard with fear and hatred those who wear their hair long, or clothes which are neither useful, conventional, prestige-catching or good for attracting the opposite sex (a recognized form of success-hunting). Those who have no obviously gainful work (like contemplatives) are likewise suspected. It is the same with fairy-tales.

Fairy-tales are for kids – that is, for people who are still too weak to achieve any measurable usefulness or success. Once they come within sight of adult achievements they must set aside childish things. Yet some of them maintain an underground culture of ancient mythology, at least for a few years. They don't give up their birth-right without a struggle.

Part of the mythology created by our society for the preservation of its necessary ethical framework is the casting of children for the

role of the deluded but touching innocent. How sweet, how moving, are the hopes and beliefs of childhood, and how sad that they must fade in the light of common day! This bit of mythology became current in the nineteenth century, when the work-and-success ethic was becoming firmly established. It was a very useful device because it allowed people to exercize their refined sensibilities in a way that did not interfere with the real business of living, which was to be useful and/or successful. One might admire the innocence of children, and envy their capacity for wonder, and so refute accusations of insensitivity or worldliness. The same need to find a harmless outlet for emotions not in accordance with the prevailing ethic also provided the segregated world of the 'artistic'. Art, like childhood, was a safe area in which to indulge 'unpractical' desires and impulses.

If a hankering after the fairy-tales and the values they articulate were confined to children, it might be possible to regard it as an inevitable casualty of the process of growing up. This is not the case, however. The victorian interest in 'primitive' societies might have been a far more serious threat to this convenient division of human impulses and emotions into the useful and the decorative. Explorers were bringing back reports of the life and religion of peoples whose customs were quite 'unlike the home life of our dear queen'. These peoples, varied as they were, operated according to philosophical and ethical systems quite alien to the era of usefulness, and in most cases their religion and social attitudes were expressed not only in custom and etiquette but in the elaborate mythology that explained and enforced them, and which *everyone* took seriously. To these newly studied peoples, fairy-tales were entertaining, but they were also serious. They were told by adults to other adults, and discussed and even 'sent up'; but although they were known since childhood, they were not children's stories, but a symbolic distillation of cultural wisdom about man's nature and destiny, and were recognized as such.

The sophistication and penetration of ethical judgment conveyed by the mythology of newly discovered cultures might indeed have been a challenge to the ability of europeans to continue to take for granted the validity of a philosophy of materialism (with aesthetic and religious drapes), if the culture of these peoples had not been immediately slotted into the space prepared for it, among children's stories and 'the arts'. The notion that primitive cultures were survivals of the world's childhood, which had, in the west, been put away

in favour of the stern realism of man's adulthood, was a really brilliant stroke of subconscious adjustment, leaving room for an appreciative and civilized study of 'primitive' cultures, but not allowing their ideas to offer any kind of alternative to the accepted ones.

Since that time, anthropologists have discovered a much less arrogant approach, and the results of their work have deeply affected our understanding of human behaviour and the place of myth in man's development. At the same time, the study of children's play and development has taught us to take seriously their fantasies and their motives. That is, it has taught a small minority to do so. The deeper understanding of man's religious nature which has been possible through the work of people like Lienhardt and Lévi Strauss, and the illumination of human growth provided by Piaget, Klein and others, has not made much impact on our culture, which still operates on utilitarian assumptions, and does it more successfully than starker versions of the doctrine might lead one to expect, precisely because we cultivate with increasing skill and enthusiasm 'artistic' outlets for the religious impulses which might otherwise upset the economic apple-cart.

It is hardly surprising in such a climate that older people, who sincerely wish that the wonderful world of childhood could endure, sadly assume that it is natural and inevitable for it to vanish. The young, however, commonly refuse to go along with this. When an impulse that springs from genuine human need is outlawed it tends to behave like an outlaw – it becomes subversive, sometimes violent, and always extreme. The extravagance of doctrine, ritual and life characteristic of the small medieval sects, who found no satisfaction for their spiritual hunger in the all-too-rational and predictable routines of the official church, is one example. The extreme ideas and behaviours of their contemporary cousins, the hippies and various similar groups, show the same over-reaction to spiritual restriction. And thousands of young people who have no intention of dropping out – rather the contrary – have identified themselves with this re-assertion of man's need to explore the 'inner' world. The drug 'scene' is certainly not made up of people looking for mystical experience; but the few who do hope for enlightenment by this road have provided a kind of blanket explanation for many whose motives are despair, disillusion and rejection, and a need to escape, rather than a desire for a fuller vision. Both those who have little hope for themselves or society, and those who are fighting to sustain a hope, have in common a rejection of the utilitarian philos-

ophy of their parents and grand-parents, and a real, though often incoherent and misdirected, belief in the mystery and glory of human life, if only it could be freed from the distortions of greed, fear and personal ambition. Some feel it is too late, the rot has gone too far for life to be worth living in the future; others are sure that something can be done, but only by drastic measures. Many swing from one view to the other, but keep on trying. And those who are working – in the arts, in politics, education, welfare and so on – to create a better world, mean by 'better' something different from the idealists of former generations. They work for better housing, freedom from want, and so on, but they see these things as means to a full human development, in which a sense of mystery and a humility before the strangeness of the powers in all creation are an important element.

If, therefore, we are right to be concerned at the attempted destruction of the sense of wonder in our society, we are wrong to feel that its recovery (if possible at all) is something that can only occur by deliberate and conscious effort. The religious sense, one of whose most important elements is the sense of wonder, is part of the nature of man. A curious (and very badly written) novel by Vercors, translated into english as '*The Borderline*', turns on the fine distinction between the animal and the human, and concludes that it is man's religious sense – however crudely expressed – which distinguishes him from even the most intelligent animals. If this is the case, it cannot be wholly extinguished for long, except by extinguishing life itself in all but the most reductive sense. So basic a hunger will reassert itself, and we are now witnessing the beginning of the cultural revolution brought about by the sudden insurrection of the religious sense after its long confinement in segregated areas. Kindly provision for its comfort in those areas was, in the end, not enough to maintain its subjection.

Movements of culture are not like the tide, remorseless natural processes in which we are caught up; and a superstitious attitude to the *zeitgeist* is as unworthy of human dignity as any other evasion of responsibility. Once new ideas cease to be the concern of a few (whom later generations many regard as pioneers, but who appear at the time as merely eccentric) and become common currency, it is time for christians to judge them and act on their judgement. Few of us are so far-sighted that we can see beyond the pre-conceptions of our own culture; but once a new tendency within it becomes apparent, the use of the gift of 'discernment of spirits' becomes appropriate. It is not difficult, in this case, to discern the true work of

the Spirit in the demand for a more mystical understanding of man's nature. But once we have formed a judgement of the spiritual value of the emerging cultural change, it is up to us to give it a truthful expression, and to help its emergence as a positive and creative power and not as an erratic and inarticulate protest.

But it is depressingly true that, in a sense, it is more difficult for christians than for others to set about cultivating the sense of wonder and all that goes with it. Religious education should mean the attempt to develop in a child an appreciation of the wonder of creation, a sense of awe at the mystery which is at the heart of himself, and an ability to express this wonder and awe in worship that involves his whole being. Religious education for christians has, in the past, become a matter of instruction in doctrinal formulae and training in a ritual which is, to the child, foreign and dull. This is one reason why christian teachers who revolted against this distortion, and realized all too well the need that people have to wonder and worship, found that religion, as normally understood, was the greatest possible obstacle. This obstacle was made up not only of the children's rooted distrust of what they had experienced as boring, negative and irrelevant in their own and their parents' lives, but of the suspicions of older people, to whom any attempt to crack the shell of religious formulae and release the inner power appeared destructive and un-christian.

Many attempts have been made over the last few years to inject a real religious sense into religious lessons and services, and some have been very successful; but they still fit too easily into the segregated area prepared for them by the past, in which their effect on the rest of life is minimal. They cannot, however lovingly and wisely presented, form the chief tool of a re-education which would give the religious sense its opportunity.

Only a total education can do this. And here I want to make a very strong plea that we catholics, as a community, make use of the one really great opportunity that history has put into our hands: the catholic schools. For good or ill, there they are, and will continue to be for some time to come. Yet most of them, good as some of them are according to accepted standards, are simply replicas of other 'good' schools of the same type, with the addition of catholic ritual, instruction, and occasional festivities. The famous 'catholic atmosphere' is, on examination, frequently not much more than a profusion of pious statues and pictures, frequent devotions, the presence of teachers in religious habits and perhaps some out-of-school chari-

table activities. The work done is often excellent; the motives and enthusiasms of the staff are impressive, but the results in terms of christian commitment among the pupils are not. What there is, is rather in spite of the overall system than because of it.

Is it not possible that we have got things the wrong way round? We have tried to introduce a christian element into the varied activities and studies which are common to most educational establishments in our kind of culture. By doing this we have tacitly accepted the priorities and values of that culture. If we, as christians, are to give the witness that is needed to the true nature of spiritual impulses everywhere becoming evident, we have to reverse the process. For most of us, a complete opting out is not possible or desirable (though there must always be some who choose this way); therefore the 'normal' educational qualifications have to be acquired. But it should be possible to study for these in the context of a way of life which is designed to develop the whole person. There is no need to be very specific about what this means, because so much excellent work in this area has been done in the last fifty years. It should be possible to create an educational community in which people learn to wonder at the world and to wonder about it. They should learn to be silent together, to create together, and to understand themselves. In this context they could find the incentive to tackle study and sport and many kinds of activities.

It is perhaps not so very far-fetched to suggest that the type of impulse animating christian educational institutions should be of the same kind that fired the beginning of the great religious orders and movements: a reaction against the stultifying 'worldliness' of accepted values, and an attempt to give human nature room to grow to its full stature in the spirit of wonder and worship and hope. This involves discipline – but a discipline accepted as part of a worthwhile enterprise, not as an end in itself. It involves deliberate training in the techniques of prayer and silence and concentration. It involves training of the aesthetic faculties, not as a spare-time hobby but as an essential part of spiritual growth.

All this implies a way of life which sets aside most of the accepted educational priorities and the patterns of living and thinking which they impose. This is the measure of our loss of contact with any concept of wholeness in education. The amount of re-thinking which is necessary hardly bears thinking of; yet it must be thought of, or we shall find ourselves in a society that is trying to educate people to fit a culture which no longer exists, and the christians – as usual – will

be tinkering with these educational functions in order to 'christianize' them.

The double failure involved is avoidable. But the strong motivation needed in order to tackle the problem will not arise simply because we recognize its desirability. It will come only if something else comes first, and that is a great revival of christian spirituality, on a level with that of the thirteenth century, but of a kind that will both judge and inspire our kind of culture. There are signs that it is coming. We need to see further, hope harder, open ourselves to the Spirit in awe. When the whole christian community is moved to repentance, love and wonder, there will be no need to wonder about education. It will happen.