The Risk of the Future

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On the fifth of October — less than a month ago chronologically; far more than a month ago in experience — my husband and I set out for Moscow to make a literary pilgrimage. Twenty-nine years ago we met in Chekov's great play, "The Cherry Orchard." He was the young leading man, and I was, as usual, the garoky understudy and bit part player, and delighted to be so, for I went into the theater with no illusions as to my greatness as an actress, but because I thought it was the best possible school for a writer. Meeting Hugh Franklin was an unexpected fringe benefit.

So this trip to Russia to see the cities where great giants of literature had worked, to see their houses, to see their very desks, was something we had long dreamed about.

We arrived at London Airport on a beautiful autumn morning. We had a two hour wait before our British Airways plane to Moscow, and we were wishing we had some place to snooze when we became aware that the voice over the loud-speaker was announcing delays on most British Airways planes. Just as it was time for us to board our flight, the British Airways engineers all went home — so all flights were cancelled.

A British Airways agent took over our case. He couldn't have been more helpful and courteous, but the entire British Airways section of the airport was in chaos. We kept being shunted from one interminable line to another. Finally the British Airways man managed to get us seats on a Scandinavian Airlines plane to Copenhagen. From where we were to pick up an Aeroflot plane to Moscow.

We arrived in Copenhagen just about the time we should have been arriving in Moscow. Our persons and bags had been searched in New York and London; they were being searched in Copenhagen when it was discovered that there was no Aeroflot plane to Moscow. There was no plane to Moscow at all. British Airways had got rid of us and SAS was stuck with us.

SAS finally decided to send us to Frankfurt. During the flight the loudspeaker came on, and a heavily accented voice told us in several languages that our arrival would be delayed because of what sounded to me like "the tragedy in Frankfurt." We asked the Scandinavian gentleman across the aisle if he knew what the tragedy was, and he smiled and said that it was not "tragedy" in Frankfurt, but "traffic." Then he sobered and said, "But there has been a tragedy which I think

*Address to the Public Libraries Section of the North Carolina Library Association at the Association's Biennial Conference. Winston-Salem, November 1, 1973.

you should know about. War has broken out in the middle east."

We spent the night of October 6th in Vienna, where again, we could find no news, and on October 7th we were finally flown by Aeroflot to Moscow and arrived late Sunday afternoon.

We left our apartment in New York at four o'clock Friday afternoon. We walked into our unexpected suite in Moscow at 8:00 Sunday evening, and we had been either in planes on in airports all that time. There was also a seven hour time difference. We had moved through fatigue and exhaustion to a strange place beyond both. And we discovered that we had suddenly lost our history, our identities as American citizens. We could find out nothing about the war, and I don't think the people we talked to were holding out on us; they really didn't know anything. There is no freedom of the press in Russia. As a matter of fact, I almost didn't get my visa because of my profession. Writers — living writers, that is — are dangerous. They think. They use their minds, and, what is more important, their artistic intuition.

In the hotel lobby we heard a rumor — only a rumor — that Vice-President Agnew had resigned. We still could find out nothing about the war — was it still going on? Who had started it? We felt disassociated, completely cut off from our own history.

The only reality which was left to us was the one reality we could share with our guides in both Moscow and Leningrad, the reality of past literature, a shared love of the novels of the great, pre Revolutionary Russian giants.

It was heavily ironic to me as we made our pilgrimages through their houses, now museums, to which evidently, few Americans go as we saw the beds, desks, the very inkwells, that these writers were writing out of the same passionate conviction which motivates the Russian writers today — writers who cannot get published in Russia. Solzhenetsyn was sent to Siberia for the same reason that Dostoyevsky was sent to Siberia. There's a connection to be made here, but nobody seems to make it. Reality is distorted and manipulated until we lose sight of what is real.

And what *is* real? I am neither a politician nor a philosopher, so I'm not going to set forth pronouncements about reality in the USSR — or the USA. Nor am I going to attempt to do what philosophers have tried for thousands of years to do — to offer an ultimate experience of reality. I only want to share with you a little of what reality is to me — writer, wife, mother, grandmother, human being.

For an artist of a discipline reality is verisimilitude, a likeness to what is real, for a likeness to what is real is the most that the human artist can produce. But most of us are given our own glimpses of verisimilitude, that likeness to what is real, to that which is beyond the finite world of provable fact, to that which transcends the limited world of limited memory.

I search for verisimilitude, for my glimpses of reality, in my stories. These stories teach me; now that *A Wind in the Door* has been published, I am beginning to learn what it is really about, and where it has taught me more about reality than I knew before.

One thing I'm learning is that reality is more than meets the human eye — or ear — or mind. John Stuart Mill says that although we can know things to some extent, we cannot know them exhaustively.

For instance, what is a frog? What is the reality of a frog? I was fascinated by a scientific article which showed pictures of a frog as seen by a human eye, by a bird's eye, by a snake's eye. Each saw a very different creature. Which frog was more *real*? And why are frogs found so often in fairy tales? Do Russian children read stories about frog princes?

The Greeks have a word for the realness of things, the essence of frog, of stone, of bread and wine, of you and me: *ousia*.

It is a search for *ousia*, for *realness* in a world that depends more and more on the unreal, which impels the human animal to make a pilgrimage to Chekov's house, to paint a picture, or sing a song, or write a story; differences in the direction of memory have fascinated many story

tellers; Merlin remembered backwards from the future to the past; so does the White Queen, in Alice; she does her screaming before she pricks her finger with the pin.

In a recent *New Yorker* cartoon a family is pictured seated around the breakfast table, and the father is saying grace: "Thank you, God, for frozen orange juice, the instant coffee, the pop-up waffles, the non-dairy powdered cream, yours in haste, Amen."

If I am searching not for synthetic, instant experience, but for *ousia* — and I am — I must admit that this search involves risk and not just the risk of a trip to Russia. To write a book is a risky business; I may fail. There are quite a few unpublished books in my study. Some of these I still think are pretty good and ought to have been published; others I am quite willing to admit do not have verisimilitude, do not have *ousia*.

One reason that children are given fewer fairy tales today than when I was little is that fairy tales are violent and they involve risk. No risk, no fairy tale. Why so many people shudder at the violence in fairy tales and close their eyes to the violence of everyday life in the 1970's is beyond me. I need the realness, the *ousia* in fairy tales, fantasy, poetry, music, to give me a sense of order, basic order, in a land where Watergate continues, where organized crime thrives, where we are on the verge of a disastrous energy crisis, where we wake up every morning almost afraid to turn on the news.

Fairy tales and fantasies are parables — parables of risk, parables of freedom, human freedom.

Freedom for me always involves structure, structure in life, structure in writing, that structure which liberates us against the structure which imprisons. The difference is that the structure which liberates always implies risk, thus possibility of failure. I am worried that we live in a climate where we are not allowed to fail, and therefore we are encouraged to take fewer and fewer risks. In college a student will often take the safe, easy course, in which he knows he can get a good grade, instead of taking the more difficult one, in an unknown area of inquiry, where he may not get the good grade he needs to have on his record. One young man at Harvard, who wrote to me after he had reread a *A Wrinkle in Time* during his sophomore year, and with whom I have been having a fascinating correspondence, has horrified his parents by switching his major from psychology to fairy tale, fantasy, and myth. "They want that Dr. in front of my name," he said ruefully. I am encouraged by the fact that here *is* a major in fantasy, fairy tale, and myth at Harvard!

He is thereby involved in a double risk, the risk of studying courses unpalatable to his parents, and the risk involved in the tales he will be delving into. In fairy tales and fantasy, failure is not only possible, it often strikes. And even when the poor peasant boy of the lovely stepchild succeeds, there is risk first. The young man may not make his way safely through the magic thicket. The wild music in the violin may destroy him. The power of the evil fairy may be stronger than that of the benevolent godmother. If the princess kisses the beast, he may devour her. Will the frog really be saved from the wicked spell and turn into a prince?

There is risk, risk of failure, of horror, of death, in fairy tales, but there is also an unspoken affirmation of the ultimate all rightness of things.

But before we can affirm this all rightness of things, we must accept immediate all wrongness. Few of us can sing, today, with Browning, that God's in his heaven and all's well with the world. It is in dark and unknown waters that fairy tales and fantasies have their home. Although we tend to think of fairy tales as light and crystal clear — glass slippers, enchanted mirrors, vast parties in great ballrooms — they speak to us, ultimately, of dark things. No one is more aware of the possible disasters which may be the result of risk than the teller of tales, of our ultimate insecurity, loneliness, horror. But the teller of these tales, ancient or modern, is also aware of the infinite value of man, and the possibilities for nobleness which risk may open up.

And the fairy-tale or fantasy-teller must give a deeper sense of verisimilitude than the writer of slice-of-life stories. It is far easier for me to believe in the burning fire of roses in George Macdonald's *The Princes and Curdie* than some recent graphic descriptions of a reality which — for me — has no *ousia*. The writer who works in fairy tale or fantasy is trying to write about a world more real than that of every day, than that shown in slice-of-life stories.

I'm sure all of you have shared with me the feeling of being jerked out of the really real world and back into our daily shadow world when you've been deep in reading a story, and somebody has interrupted you. And I've felt this even more strongly when Im writing. If I am fully thrown into the writing, thrown out of myself in the ecstasy of work — *ex stasis*, outside the body — and into the world of the story, if I am interrupted there is a frightening moment of transition when I am jerked out of the *real* world, and must return to the much - smaller - dimensioned world of every day life.

Fairy tales are at home in the world of magic, but in a true fairy tale this magic is neither coy, nor impossible. If we cannot believe the magic of a fairy tale, then it isn't a real fairy tale.

Magic is power; Count Grinssory wants to rule Hamelin-Loring instead of the rightful heir to the throne. The wicked step sisters want the rightful place of Cinderella. The wicked wolf wants power over the three little pigs. In primitive societies, power is seen as being both mana and taboo. We're used to the word taboo, mana isn't used as commonly. The great power lines which stretch across our country and make our lights work, and provide electricity for our refrigerators and washing machines are, when used this way, mana. But the husband of a friend of ours was a linesman, and in an accident touched one of those high tension wires, and was immediately killed: taboo. The naked hand may not touch this kind of power. Those who would deliberately use taboo — both in real life and in fairy tales — are arrogant in the ultimate sense of arrogance. They usurp the prerogatives of the gods; they fall into the classical Greek tragic flaw of *hubris*.

Mana, creative power, not destructive power, is working with the gods. The magic of mana is never a do-it-yourself-activity. Russia? U.S.? Odysseus can only make the difficult journey home from the wars because the goddess Pallas Athene wishes him to succeed and to return unscathed from all his perils, and he does what she tells him to do. The small bird and the gilded statue of the prince, in Oscar Wilde's fairy tale, work together to alleviate misery and suffering. And when Meg has to return to Camazotz alone, it is only because Mrs. Whatsit loves her, only because Meg is able to receive this love, and turn her own love towards Charles Wallace, that she is able to rescue him from the taboo power of it. Mana is aware of the pain of life, of death and resurrection. And therefore there is usually a hint of eschatology in fairy tales. They break out of chronological time and are able to move freely in Other Time.

Our sub-conscious minds move in Other Time, are uninhibited by daily linear time. In our sleeping dreams time is sometimes fantastically condensed; in a few minutes we can dream many hours worth of adventures. Exhaustion shoved me into Other Time in Russia. As we go deeper into the world of imagination, into fantasy, fairy tale, myth, we become even more free of the arbitrary shackles of time.

The teller of tales is always aware — consciously or not, it makes no difference — of taboo. Bluebeard's wife is forbidden to open the door to one room only. Cinderella was not to stay at the party past the stroke of twelve. Peter Rabbit was not to enter Mr. McGregor's garden.

It is only recently that fairy tale, fantasy, and myth, have been thought of as being exclusively for children. Originally they were not for children at all; children were not mature enough for them.

It is important that children be taught the Greek and Roman myths, because these myths are part of our background, of our MTH, but they weren't written for children at all. *Gulliver's Travels* is found

on the children's shelves in libraries, but is was very definitely written for adults. And Malory most certainly wasn't writing for children in his *Morte d' Arthur*. No good writer of children's books writes for just children — to write just for children is an insult to children.

Children are better believers than most grown ups. They are aware of what most adults have forgotten, that the daily, time-bound world of provable fact is the secondary world, the shadow world; and story, painting, song, give us glimpses of the real world.

Aristotle talks of the willing suspension of disbelief: when I am reading a story into which I enter wholly, I not only suspend belief, but I believe in a way in which I am seldom able to believe in everyday life. The world, the primary world, which seizes me and makes me part of it is perhaps a child's world: I do not become part of the world of many contemporary novels or plays — *Portnoy's Complaint*, for instance, or *Krapp's Last Tape*, or even certain slice-of-life novels for ten and twelve year olds, because these works, brilliant though some of them be, conform only to the ways of this world of provable fact, and ignore the possibility of a larger universe.

If I am a child, in the sense of having an acute case of Peter-Pantheism, then this is pagan and puerile. But I must, in my journey into adulthood, middle age, and onwards, take all of myself, and this means that I must keep with the wonder and awareness that was mine. Out of childhood and youth the adult is forged, and to become grown up implies risk and grief and pain and fear and the dark shadow of death. But as I learn from the slings and arrows of chronology, I must be not just 54 yrs. old, but 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-and on up to 54, ALL of me, not just an isolated chronological fragment. It is only with all of me that I may move into the worlds of fantasy, fairy tale, myth, and it is only with all of me that I may attempt to understand the *ousia* of the frog.

Rainer Maria Rilke writes: "How should we be able to forget those ancient myths about dragons that at the last minute turn into princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. . . . Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us."

I know that when I am most monstrous, I am most in need of love. When my temper flares out of bounds it is usually set off by something unimportant which is on top of a series of events over which I have no control, which make me helpless, which cause me anguish and frustration. I am not lovable when I am enraged, although it is when I most need love.

One of our children, when he was two or three years old, used to rush at me when he had been naughty, and beat against me; what he wanted, by this monstrous behaviour, was an affirmation of love, and I would put my arms around him and hold him very tight until the dragon was gone and the loving small boy had returned.

Monsters are an intrinsic element of fairy tales. Some monsters are never held close, loved, redeemed, and remain ugly and fearful. Nevertheless, despite the risk of failure, of horror, of death, in fairy tales, there is also an unspoken affirmation of the ultimate all rightness of things.

Here we have a basic difference between a book for children and a book for adults. I believe that a book for children should affirm this basic all rightness. This does not mean that the book should not show a world in which there is death, disaster, unfairness, but where the adult novel may stop in rage and near-despair at man's cruelty to man, at the irrational disasters of nature, at the stupidity of war and rumour of war, at corruption in those who should be our examples, a children's book must go beyond this and point to that small light in the darkness, that light which the darkness cannot extinguish. This is a more difficult challenge than — for instance — to write a novel set in one of our monstrous mental hospitals, showing all the horrors therein starkly, brutally, truthfully — but going no further. The challenge to the writer of fantasy, fairy tale, myth, is that he have the courage to move beyond the empirical, technocratic world

and into the unknown realm beyond provable fact.

Meet the Austins was rejected by many publishers because it begins with a death, and children, at that time — the late fifties, sixties, were supposed to be protected from such stark reality. *A Wrinkle in Time* was rejected because — among other reasons — it makes evil tangible. And yet both these books are an affirmation of the ultimate all rightness of things.

I cannot affirm this, in writing or in life, unless I affirm it is a context of a world which seems to be all wrong. Only in this world, which is the world I know, the world I am in, may I try to see the frog not only as I see him, but as the bird sees him, as the snake sees him, as the princess in the fairy tale sees him.

I am reading fairy tales to my granddaughters, aged just four and five, reading these stories aloud for the first time since their mother and her siblings have grown past the reading-aloud-at-night period. When one of these little ones is frightened in the night and cries out in terror, the mother-instinct is to pick the child up and cradle it and say, "It's all right, it's all right."

What was my mother promising me, all those years ago, when she held me in her arms and said, "Don't be afraid. Mother's here. It's all right.'

What was I promising my children when I did the same thing? I had certainly learned that Mother, no matter how much she may want to, cannot stop accidents, cannot stop wars, cannot stop death. So what am I promising today when I pick up a four year old grandchild and say, "It's all right?"

It has something to do with faith in the basic structure of the universe, that there is an underlying all rightness to things. The great astronomer, Leverrier was making this same affirmation when the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus were discovered; to the scientists of the day there did not appear to be any explanation for such unstructured behavior of the part of a planet. But Leverrier did not throw up his hands in horror and say that the heavens were in a mess. With faith in the basic all rightness of the cosmos he computed the size, position, and orbit of a planet which, if the strange irregularity of Uranus was to make sense in an ordered universe, *must* be in the sky. Because Leverrier had a fundamental faith that the universe is not irrational, he risked predicting that Neptune had to be there. Quite a lot of eminent and respectable scientists thought he was mad, that he would fail. But he didn't. Neptune was there, just as he had predicted, a hitherto invisible planet, causing the seemingly meaningless irregularities in the orbit of Uranus.

It is this same faith in the all rightness of things which sends me to the typewriter, which enables me to hold and comfort a child, no matter how all wrong everything around me may be. In a world which seems to be without hope, I still affirm hope.

Because I am a human animal, which talks instead of tails or barks or meows, because I can draw on the memory treasuse house, the MTH of the past, and risk looking ahead to an unknown future, I can move from *ousia* to hope. When I affirm the all rightness of the universe, this all rightness for me may be set in the context of pain, of death, of loss; I have often been tested in this affirmation, and I make it austerely and soberly. Nevertheless, in spite of everything, because of the courage and compassion and vision my family and friends and people like you have given me, I can still go to my typewriter, hold a child in my arms, stand here in front of you, and say, "Yes. It is all right."

And I call on all of you to make this affirmation with me. I am here because you give me strength to say my own Yes. We need to remember our heritage, and build our future on thousands of years of tradition, turmoil, travail, and say Yes, it *is* all right. We reverence our past; we are alive in the present; and we look forward to the future with excitement because we know that this is the only hope for the world. To say, It is all right, is an enormous risk, but I ask you, with confidence in your response to take the risk with me.