Introductory lecture:
The Age of Fairy Tales: Hans Christian Andersen and Community[i] [ii]

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Our time is indeed a time of fairy tales. That is how Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Dryad" from 1868 starts. The dryad is a small spirit or fairy that lives in – and is bound to – life in a tree outside Paris. She can glimpse the light of the great city and wishes to experience it. Just once! Her wish is fulfilled, she gets to Paris, experiences the lights, life and drive of the capital. She gets her wish fulfilled in the urban, modern world, but at the cost of her life. The small spirit cannot live away from her tree. Andersen concludes his story about the dryad in this way: "All this has happened and been experienced. We ourselves have seen it, at the Paris Exposition in 1867, in our time, the great and wonderful time of fairy tales." Hans Christian Andersen regarded his authorship and his fairy tales in particular as a way of understanding his life and his own age. Most of his fairy tales and stories portray transformations: the lovely story, for example, of being changed from a mermaid into a beautiful young woman, but also the profound pain and inevitable price that must be paid. The fantastic story of becoming a beautiful swan, but also the path of suffering the ugly duckling has to take to reach this apotheosis.

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"Now let's play human beings; that's always something!" So says the old, worn-out doll whose neck has been repaired in the story "The Money Pig" from 1854, which is an amusing and grotesque story about the fall of the piggy bank and the dance macabre of the toys in the children's nursery and in a world of 'as-if-we-were-humans':

> Everybody sat and watched, and the audience had been asked to applaud, crack, and stamp as they were pleased. But the Riding Whip said he never cracked for old folks, only for young ones who weren't yet married. "I crack for everybody," said the Cracker. "One must, of course, be in the proper place!" thought the Spittoon. And such were their thoughts as the play went on.

The money pig has the form of a pig and is so crammed full that he can no longer rattle at all, which is described as “the highest honor a Money Pig can attain.” He stands there high above all the other toys, but in the tumult, he crashes down and lies smashed to smithereens on the floor: “while the pennies hopped and danced about. The smallest spun like tops, and the bigger ones rolled away, particularly one big silver dollar who wanted to go out and see the world. And so he did, and so did all the rest.” The coins roll on out into the world where they can create new plays, so that more old dolls can pretend to be humans. The tale ends with a new piggy bank arriving and, like its predecessor, it is also unable to rattle, but that it because it is empty. There are fluctuations on the financial markets in Andersen’s stories!

In less than three pages, Andersen, in a grotesque and ironic allegory, tells us of the modern forces that are prevalent in his own age. And it is a truly sublime touch to make the setting that of the children’s nursery and the universe of toys. This amusing story may on the surface look like a little fairy tale for children, but it is far from just that. “The Money Pig” is a story about the forces – silver coins and human games – that change the world.

Andersen’s main theme is often precisely this: How can we become human beings in the centrifuge of time? What constitutes human nature? And what is required to remain a human being when conditions are constantly changing? In “The Galoshes of Fortune” from 1838 Andersen plays with a pair of overshoes that bring the protagonists into strange situations – and he often makes use of footwear as artefacts and symbols in his tales. And if he does not use shoes or other kinds of footwear, there are walks, journeys, ascents into chimneys, voyages down rivers on a water-lily leaf or through scary street gutters in a paper hat.

Andersen’s fairy tales and the rest of his art depict transformation and, in particular, the necessity to transform oneself if one is to become a true human being. In such iconic fairy tales as “The Little Mermaid” from 1837, “The Snow Queen” from 1845, “The Nightingale” from 1844 and “The Shepherdess and the Chimney Sweep” from 1845 it is the desire to transform oneself from an object or a demon into a human being that unfolds in love and in a loving community. This community can be found in faith, in the bosom of the family, it can be the love of a mother or of parents for a child or the bond that can come into being between two people who love each other.

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The modern societies in which we now live call for constant mobility, ability to adapt and a high level of flexibility in the single individual. Here the silver coins have been rolling a long time, as in "The Money Pig", and we who play at being humans roll along with them. One could claim that the modern individual has a greater need for boots than roots. It is motion, the feet, that constitutes the modern and creates the modern. That motion at the same time creates an eye for the traditional and its values, well, that is another matter and another aspect of the conditions of the modern world.

Hans Christian Andersen lived in a different time! The society and environment he was born into and grew up in as a poor child are far removed from modern welfare societies. Or is it? In the course of Andersen's lifetime, from 1805 to 1875, a society saw the light of day which, in a way, we are still living in. It is a society that is based on common values such as the rights of the individual, trust, humanity towards others, freedom of expression and respect. It is a society that is based on fundamental values about which we at present have to ask ourselves: Are these eternal values?

In the traditional, class-divided and privilege-ridden societies of Andersen's time, breaking with social patterns was unusual. But that was precisely what Andersen did. He sort of jumped from one community form to another, from traditionalism to a kind of modernity and individualism. He extracted himself from the soil of his roots. He exchanged his roots for boots and strove towards the sun, the light, fame and the top of the social ladder. Hans Christian Andersen moved up in society and out into society as a free artist and an individual in search of happiness. In the movement he undertook as a human being and as an artist he portrays, one might perhaps say, the formation of the modern. For that reason, Andersen is still topical and modern.

His experiences from this breaking-out process are present everywhere in his writing, perhaps as a motif, theme or figure, but mostly as an enormous productivity, imaginativeness and creativity which may spring from the mental or existential unrest and desire for recognition that could never be completely satisfied in him. In that sense, Andersen is an extremely modern writer. Or rather, his fairy tales and stories possess a nerve and a creative urge that are modern, because they point towards forms of identity that the modern both demands and creates, and that include anxiety, ambivalence, agitation and restlessness.

Many social, work-related, family-related and emotionally determined communities changed considerably during Andersen's lifetime. A number of traditionally determined communities collapsed. Hans Christian Andersen registers and portrays this unceasingly in his art, sometimes

with pleasure, at other times with horror, but always with an artistic intuitive sense of the tensions in the ambivalence that comes with the beginnings of modernity. He not only describes the new prerequisites for human communities but, to a great degree and with personal pain, how social exclusion results from the formation of modern communities. “The Little Match Girl” from 1848 depicts the results of social exclusion in the story of the working-class girl who experiences hunger-induced fantasies about vast quantities of food.

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Andersen registered the new, was enthusiastic but frightened at the same time to see how the old norms and old, solid culture were being undermined and were disintegrating. This ambivalence is everywhere in Andersen, who himself had to break out of straitened circumstances to gain high social status through his art and his genius. There is ambivalence in experiences that make him a mould-breaker both socially and as an artist. He has to develop a new genre in order to express himself. This he does in his fairy tales and stories. In his fairy tales, then, Andersen is capable of speaking with many voices and thus to many different realities: that of the child, the dreams of the young person, the voice of those in love, the experiences of the adult, the retrospective gaze of the old person.

It is interesting to see how, in his early works, Andersen is bound by such traditional genres as, for example, the classical folk tale. But in 1835, he breaks out and publishes *Tales, Told for Children.* This marked the birth of a completely new, worldwide literary genre.

The German cultural scientist Walter Benjamin has said that the folk tale belongs to the people and not to an individual artist. The folk tale contains common experience, it passes from mouth to mouth, is adapted and altered in the course of time (Benjamin 1936). The Kunstmärchen, the novel and the novella, on the other hand, belong to a single personality, that of a writer and his or her ability to transmute experiences into artistic form. Hans Christian Andersen takes the common genres, such as the folk tale, as his point of departure, but makes them personal and lends them his own artistic expression. This enables his stories and fairy tales to include the deep experiences, pains, sorrows, humiliation, social climbing, love and loss of love of the poor man, the child and the little man in society.

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In his memoir *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, 1855, Andersen transforms his life into a fairy tale. At the same time, he describes the journey through his own age as one towards the light, although typified by anxiety and at great personal cost. He became what is now often called a 'mould-breaker.' The age Andersen travelled through in his lifetime and in which he wrote his legacy were 'The Time of the Fairy Tales,' characterised by rapid leaps forward within social, political and technological development.

In the European countries and elsewhere, the ideas of the Enlightenment regarding the transference of sovereignty from an absolute monarch to the people and the nation made their mark. The European nation states were formed as new, national communities that are held together by conceptions of a common ethnic base, history, literature, art and culture. This transformed the political culture and the political communities.

Denmark also moved from an absolute monarchy to a democratic system, with the approval of the Constitution in 1849 a concrete result of this. But in addition, the traditional communities that bound everyday life together for the most part were also transformed. Out in the country, where 85 percent of the population lived at the time, the old village communities were dissolved. The so-called 'enclosure movement' and reorganisation of land ownership changed the traditional concept of community. In the towns, crafts and trade underwent major changes and the old guilds and privileges came under siege from a freer market economy and the beginnings of industrialization. At the same time, new ideas of the family became widespread, with the individual being increasingly viewed as the centre of things.

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Politically speaking, Denmark was hardly fortunate! In the year 1800, the dual monarchy of Denmark-Norway still included the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenborg as well as a number of overseas colonies. This kingdom had a powerful international position as well as a strong navy. Between then and 1870, however, the country underwent a succession of disastrous events. Denmark chose an unfortunate alliance with the French emperor, Napoleon, which led to the superior British navy fighting and defeating the Danish navy at so-called Battles of Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807. This led to Denmark losing its position as a naval power and subsequent chaos and national bankruptcy in 1813, followed by the loss of Norway in 1814. In the latter half of the 19th

century, in 1864, Denmark lost yet another fatal war against Germany, and lost Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenborg. From that point onward, Denmark has been considered one of the small countries of Europe.

One of the reasons why Denmark got involved in this fatal war against Germany in 1864 can be found in the strong nationalist sentiment that was flourishing in Europe, including Denmark. The 19th century was a period of 'nation-building' in Europe, when national sentiment and culture were strong and expressive. In Denmark, the period of the 1830s and 1840s has subsequently been referred to as the Danish 'Golden Age', because it was characterised by a great upsurge within culture, art and science. This was when the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard lived and wrote his works. Andersen published, as mentioned, his first tales during this period: *Tales, Told for Children* in 1835. The sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen and the greatest Danish painters, Købke and Eckersberg, are active at this time too, as is the writer and educationalist N.F.S. Grundtvig. Science flourished, with Hans Christian Ørsted discovering electromagnetism, which was a prerequisite for the later electrification of industry.

Andersen was fascinated by the developments within technology and natural science. The British instrument-maker James Watt had managed to get the first steam engine to work in 1774. It was the prerequisite for industrialisation and for new, revolutionary forms of transport, such as the steamship and the steam locomotive. Andersen enthusiastically described the potential of the steam locomotive in his travel account *A Poet's Bazaar* from 1842, where speed and power are a fairy tale. In other stories, such as "Thousands of Years from Now", 1853, he fantasises about how it might be possible for people to "fly on wings of steam through the air, across the ocean." Electromagnetism created a technological revolution, both to power electromotors and as a basis for the development of the telegraph, which became the first global communications technology when in the 1860s and 1870s cable links were established between Europe and China and between Europe and North America.

Hans Christian Andersen was enthusiastic about and fascinated by the potential that lay in technical advances. At the same time, he was scared by the changes they brought about. In the story "The Muse of the New Century", 1861, and "The Dryad" he refers to the steam engine as "Master Bloodless", which implies that steam and its power lacked soul and the values that best served humanity.

From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, Europe was characterised by new currents of ideas. The so-called Romantic period begins in Europe around 1800 and it is first seen in

literature, philosophy and art. The codex of reason is gradually replaced in Romanticism by the freer cultivation of feelings, individual imagination and the connection between spirit and nature. The individual, with his or her rich emotional life, existence and development become the aim for 'Bildung' and the shaping of the personality. Later, the Romantic idea is to a great extent linked to notions of the national and the popular as cohesive forces in communities. The poetry, tales, novels and plays of Romanticism deal with such subjects as the past, history and that which is particularly national. In addition, there are the depictions of love and of the role of the artist and of imagination. A particular angle is linked to the 'discovery' of the child and childhood. Writers such as B.S. Ingemann, N.F.S. Grundtvig and of course Hans Christian Andersen do not only write *about* the child but *for* the child – and not least perhaps about the child within the adult.

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Grundtvig said that no one had ever lived who had made out something without first having loved it. This became one of the basic assumptions of a Danish pedagogy that was based on the experiences and prequalifications of the individual pupil. The heart, love, emotions, tales and imagination were given higher priority. As was the individual. For Grundtvig this was via the idea of how children learn and how young people acquire knowledge via narration and making their own experiences. The same inspiration is to be found in Hans Christian Andersen, who developed his own literary genre. In both Andersen and Grundtvig it is the heart, desire and love that are to fuel the exploratory process. Andersen said about his Fairy Tales and Stories that they were 'Told for Children.' This does not mean that they are children's stories, but that they are told for the child in all human beings. The child and the child's fantasy, the child's ability to imagine things become important categories for understanding what learning and artistic awareness are. The person who does not love his or her material like a child will never acquire it. It is learning and values that are basically more important today than back then.

And so that time – that of Hans Christian Andersen – was indeed the time of fairy tales! The modernity which Andersen sensed, and which broke down traditional communities has since developed and forms the prerequisite for our own age and its communities. Have the modern characteristics that Andersen saw and sensed perhaps now reached a point from where other possible forms will take over? Perhaps we have to find new ways of playing human beings. Hans Christian Andersen's art is still there at our disposal by its insistence on the fact that a human being is basically a human being. It is his great work that made him an honorary citizen in Odense on the

6th of December 1867 and his ground-breaking thoughts with universal potential that still talks to us now, in Andersen's prosperity. With these words, I leave the scene to 19 great examples of how we can make sense of Hans Christian Andersen and Community today.

References

Walter Benjamin. 1936. Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows, in: ders.: Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. II, 2, Frankfurt/M. 1977, S. 438-465.

[i] This introductory lecture has not been peer reviewed.

[ii] This introductory lecture is also published in the anthology *Hans Christian Andersen and Community* (2019), edited by Anne Klara Bom, Jacob Bøggild and Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen.