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**“The art of flying high” — Peter Fogtdal
on Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Ugly
Duckling* in the light of the postmodern
reality of existence**

Introduction

Fairy tales constitute some of the most successful narratives ever created. Due to the similarity of fairy-tale plotlines all around the globe, the fact that they have followed human societies since the origins of storytelling, as well as their ubiquitous presence in popular culture, fairy tales have been considered as universal literature, conveying fundamental truths about human existence. While investigating the fairy-tale heritage of the world, it proves hardly possible to pass over the legacy of Hans Christian Andersen, the Danish master of the literary fairy tale. His unprecedented take on the genre, where the seemingly straightforward narrative style, inspired by the oral tradition of the folktale, conveys double-layered messages appealing to both children and adults, still cannot be overestimated.

Besides retaining popularity among the subsequent generations of readers, fairy tales written by Andersen, such as *The ugly duckling*, *The Snow Queen*, or *The little mermaid*, have provided a wealth of inspiration for artists of different times and backgrounds, and so they do up till now, but though on different terms. Particularly over the last few decades, scholars of the fairy-tale genre have noticed a remarkable increase of interest in the fairy-tale tradition among contemporary writers of fiction. The postmodern

“fairy-tale boom,” observed currently within all kinds of narrative media, from literature to video games, comes along with a substantial change in the intertextual use of fairy tales, which has been reported as follows:

In last three decades (1975–2005), however, there has been a perceptible shift in the use of fairy tales by novelists and filmmakers. Rather than being something that underlies the narrative and informs its structure, or a handy metaphor, the fairytale has become central to the work. (Smith 2007: 1)

Rather than just retold in a fresh, more accessible manner, fairy tales nowadays tend to be revised with all the implications inherent to this term. In other words, the arrival of postmodernism has given rise to what can be called as revisionary fairy-tale fiction, produced in order to trigger critical reflection on its sources, especially in terms of how they do or do not resonate with the modernized 21st century society.

Compared to the wide range of folktales revised repeatedly by different English-speaking authors, the overall number of reworkings based on stories written by Andersen is still scarce. Nevertheless, while staying on the margins of the folk-tale mainstream, the tales written by Andersen are consistently evoked in the majority of anthologies collecting revisionary fairy-tale fiction, both American, English and Danish. Hence, revision should be considered as a significant trend in the recent reception of the writer’s literary heritage. In the present article, I discuss an exemplary reworking of Andersen’s world-known fairy-tale classic *The ugly duckling*, which is a short story entitled *The ugly girl*¹ (*Den grimme kælling* 1996), written by a contemporary Danish author Peter Fogtdal. Fogtdal’s reworking is one of the kind, owing to which the fairy-tale genre has recently marked its presence as “grown-up literature,” explicitly aimed at older readers: adults and young adults. What stands at the centre of Fogtdal’s revision is the outlook on life conveyed through the course of “the ugly duckling’s” journey, intended as a parable of Andersen’s own social ascent. Bearing in mind the autobiographical appeal of the story, I begin by providing an outline of what can be called as a “philosophy of existence” imprinted into Andersen’s fictional and non-fictional writings. Subsequently I demonstrate, how the author’s look on life has been reflected in *The ugly duckling*, and finally revised by Fogtdal in *The ugly girl*, with the main focus on the character performing the hero function, as well as the view of the relation between nature and culture. By juxtaposing the two tales, I seek to identify the role of Fogtdal’s revision with regard to

¹ As there is no official English translation of Peter Fogtdal’s short story *Den grimme kælling*, all the extracts from the story quoted in this paper, as well as its title, have been translated by the author of this paper.

the further reception of Andersen’s tale, while read against the reality of the postmodern condition.

Life as a fairy tale

It can be argued that Hans Christian Andersen’s worldwide and time-enduring success rests upon two major pillars, the first one being his ground-breaking contributions to the art of storytelling, and the second one – his remarkable life as a storyteller. Johan de Mylius, one of Denmark’s leading experts on the fairy-tale master’s life and oeuvre, draws attention to the fact that the international scholarly reception of Hans Christian Andersen is dominated by research considering his works against the background of his biography. Far-fetched parallels are drawn between the author’s life and fiction, whereas the imaginative genesis of his work tends to be neglected (de Mylius 2004). Interestingly enough, the one fuelling the rise of the biographical approach in Andersen studies is the author himself. As noted by de Mylius, Andersen was highly aware of the fact that the painful misery in which he was raised made his breakthrough even more spectacular; hence his fondness of turning personal experience into fiction.

Little known is the fact that fairy tale is not the only genre Andersen pursued. Besides novels, travelogues, poems and plays, the author wrote as many as four autobiographies. In the one entitled *The true story of my life*, written originally in German (*Das Märchen meines Lebens ohne Dichtung*, 1847), the author concludes as follows: “the history of my life will be the best commentary to all my works” (Andersen 1926: 207). The English-language sequel to his second official autobiography, *The fairy tale of my life (Mit livs eventyr*, 1855), is where Andersen draws an explicit parallel between his life and the genre that brought him most recognition: the fairy tale. The writer’s account begins with the famous statement: “My life is a lovely story, happy and full of incident” (Andersen 1867: 1). In spite of the soaring achievement of his work, the complexities of Andersen’s life, explored among all by Jackie Wullschlager (Wullschlager 2001), seem to contradict the idyllic “happily ever after,” a trademark of a typical fairy-tale scenario. Bearing that in mind, the autobiographies written by Andersen stand fore and foremost as a testimony to the writer’s ongoing attempts at defusing the turmoils of his successful, but troubled rise to fame. Narrated by Andersen himself, the course of his life unfolds as an archetypical “rags-to-riches story.” Within the frame of this narrative pattern, the writer strives to “give his life the form and content of a fairy tale” (Zipes 2005: 46), not in the least by transposing it into the realm of fiction. Works such as *The ugly duckling*, but also the novels:

The Improvisatore (*Improvisatoren*, 1835) and *O. T.* (1836), universalise the author's own rise as a person, as well as his view of life, whose relevance in the modern context is a debatable issue, just as is its position with regard to the author's own era.

From the perspective of literary criticism, Andersen's literary production tends to be situated at an intersection of romanticism and the so-called "romantisme," a movement, whose emergence in Denmark dates back to 1830's and 1840's, and denotes the upcoming decline of the Danish "golden age romanticism" (Rossel 1992: 228-237). Andersen's move away from the idealism of the romantic era is marked by his predilection for realistic rather than imaginative settings,² his recognition for the repressed, demonic aspects of human nature, as expressed in *The shadow* (*Skyggen*, 1847), as well as his sensibility towards the dark sides of existence, as a result of which the majority of the author's most popular fairy tales lack happy endings. On the other hand, while seeking reassurance for the premisses of his own social and artistic ascent, Andersen happens to resort to some of the most basic principles of the romantic era, such as sentimentality, the monistic assertion of harmony between body and mind, or the pantheistic belief in the comforting omnipresence of God.

In 1838, Andersen's predilection for projecting himself into his work was put under strict scrutiny by Søren Kierkegaard, another world-renowned leading representative of the Danish "romantisme." In a book entitled *From the papers of one still living* (*Af en endnu levendes papirer*, 1838), his very first major publication, the future precursor of the philosophy of existentialism carried out a highly critical review of Andersen's novel *Only a fiddler* (*Kun en spillemand*, 1837). According to the philosopher, the book discredits Andersen as a novelist, because the characters he creates in it exhibit a disturbing lack of ability to embrace the hardships of life. Kierkegaard's view of existence as inherently meaningless and absurd calls for a self-conscious, self-responsible and independently acting individual, as only such a one is capable of filling the existential void with meaning. Meanwhile, what he finds reflected in the novel's principal character Christian, an aspiring violinist deeply defeated by fate, is Andersen's own "incompetent personality," wallowing in the paralysing self-pity over his unappreciated genius (Kierkegaard 2000: 13-19).

For Kierkegaard, the fact that Andersen dwells so much on the "individual phenomena from his own experience," prevents the author from developing a comprehensive "view of life," which the novel in question is deemed to lack.

² Though he is also known for creating imperceptible transitions between the everyday and the supernatural (Kofoed 1996: 247).

Paradoxically enough, what Kierkegaard perceived as a sign of Andersen’s lack of vision, can be traced in his later production as one of the main principles, on the basis of which the author’s actual worldview is formed and expressed. The preference for passive rather than active individuals, driven by the power of circumstance rather than their own deliberate endeavours, runs as a common thread through a variety of Andersen’s stories, also them that come equipped with happy endings, just like *The ugly duckling*. Judging by Andersen’s own remarks, as recorded by Elias Bredsdorff (Bredsdorff 1975), the tale was intended as an autobiography in fictional disguise, and so has it been received by the critics. *The ugly duckling*, bullied by his fellow barnyard animals as a result of his awkward appearance, reflects the author in his early years — an ungainly looking boy mocked and teased by the provincial milieu of his Danish home town Odense. Regardless of the troubled origins, “the ugly duckling” grows to enjoy the nobility of life as “a royal bird,” just like Andersen rose to be recognized and feted by the social elite of Europe.

The ugly duckling vs the laws of existence

While reinvestigating his own “duckling-to-swan” transformation, Andersen ponders about the concept of social identity. Based on the assumption that our position in society is something predetermined, the author seeks to identify its major determinants: is it the qualities inherent in our nature, or is it our cultural surroundings? In *The ugly duckling*, the author decides upon this matter in a highly conclusive, and yet disputable way. As illustrated by Simon Rosendal Frandsen and Anders Simmelkiær, the dynamics between nature and culture is what underlies the whole of the duckling’s journey from the duckyard to the old manor house garden (Frandsen & Simmelkiær 2006: 27). Right after birth, the hero is introduced to the duckyard, a cultural environment which he deserts for the sake of the great moor. Here, the runaway nearly gets killed in a hunt. Frightened by the harsh realities of life in the wild, he finds shelter in another place of culture: a hut inhabited by an old woman and her pets. After a short stay there, the duckling gets lured by the summer bliss outside and sets out into the wide world once more. Soon comes winter though, and the duckling gets rescued from freezing to death by a peasant passing by. The peasant takes the duckling home to his hut – another representation of culture to be abandoned. The confused traveller stays torn between the world of culture and nature right until he reaches the old manor house. Here, the hero discovers his genuine identity as a full-grown swan, and happily joins a flock of other swans swimming on the garden lake nearby.

Swans are wild birds. Nevertheless, the one figuring in Andersen's tale does not settle down where wild birds belong. Rather than making his way into the untamed realm of nature, the eponymous duckling ends up as a domestic bird, yet within the comfort of the beautifully cultivated garden landscape. The journey depicted in *The ugly duckling* is completed at a stage, where the hero's natural qualities are articulated well enough to earn him a proper place in culture: "It matters nothing if one is born in a duck-yard, if one has only lain in a swan's egg" (Andersen 2009: 260). In the passage quoted above, considered as the main motto of Andersen's tale, the author defies the dichotomous thinking about nature and culture, rendering the two as complementary rather than opposite ideas. The moral of *The ugly duckling* is beloved around the world as advocating against prejudice and superficial judgements of others, while promoting the concepts of inner value and beauty, as well as the virtues of suffering, endurance and persistence. What goes unnoticed by the general reader is the fact that the message conveyed within the tale goes deeper than that, revealing its darker side.

Both with regard to the theme and structure, *The ugly duckling* unfolds as a quest story. As defined by Vladimir Propp in his famous study entitled *Morphology of the Folk tale* (1928, English 1958, 1968), quest tale is a narrative driven by experience of lack (Propp 1968: 25-65). Just as stated in Propp's definition, *The ugly duckling* pictures a hero being put on trials while pursuing something valuable that is missing, in this case, his own sense of belonging. The course of "the ugly duckling's" journey is often discussed as an example of the early nineteenth-century, holistic understanding of life as "dannelse," in German: "Bildung." The concept signifies a formation process, in which an individual strives towards existential harmony and completion. The process is typically staged as a journey following the "home-homeless-home again" pattern, as a result of which the protagonist, preferably a young man, grows to recognize and accept his proper position in the world. So far, the quest depicted by Andersen complies with the main principles of the "Bildung thought," as outlined above. What diverges from it, is the protagonist himself and his role within the process of personal formation.

"Bildung," or "dannelse" is a voyage of discovery. On the one hand, implied in this definition lies the assumption that the hero's final destination is predetermined, ready to be discovered. On the other hand, the idea of "Bildung" presupposes an active, attentive attitude to life, by virtue of which the character develops mentally and grows able to make the right existential choices, necessary to proceed in the right direction. Contrary to this idea, the only line of development to be traced in Andersen's tale is the one concerning the duckling's exterior appearances. Remarkably enough, the hero's moral character is already fully developed, whereas the physical transformation

only confirms the intrinsic beauty of his spirit. In Andersen’s rendition, the romantic belief in the harmony of body and mind turns into yet another existential truth, expressed in the statement constituting the second motto of the tale: “He was too, too happy, but not a bit proud, *for a good heart is never proud*” (Andersen 2003: 74).³

“The ugly duckling” is inherently humble, insecure and withdrawn. In his attempt to reinforce the Platonic ideal of unity between beauty and goodness, Andersen equips the protagonist with attributes that prevent the beauty-related pride and vanity, but, at the same time, impair him as a quest hero by depriving of initiative, daring and vision. Contrary to Propp’s findings about the hero function, the success of the duckling’s journey does not rely on any deliberate action, but an instinctive, entirely subconscious drive to move forward. The hero embarks on his journey “with his eyes shut” (Andersen 2009: 254). He proceeds on the way while relying on a series of coincidences, such as a hunting dog deciding to spare his life for no apparent reason (Andersen 2009: 254), a hut door slip open, making it easy to sneak in (Andersen 2009: 255) or out (Andersen 2009: 259) as needed, a peasant passing by and a sudden outburst of spring, both just in time to prevent the duckling from freezing to death (Andersen 2009: 259). When the final destination is reached, it is still not on purpose. The duckling simply “finds himself there,” “before he even knew how all this happened” (Andersen 2009: 259).

Though rich in experiences, the quest undertaken by “the ugly duckling” does not induce any changes in the hero’s attitude:

“The ugly duckling” before

“The poor Duckling did not know where it should stand or walk; it was quite melancholy.” (Andersen 2009: 254)

“The ugly duckling” after

“Then he felt quite ashamed, and hid his head under his wings, for he did not know what to do.” (Andersen 2009: 260)

In spite of the passivity and insecurity intrinsic to his nature, “the ugly duckling” still manages to reach his proper place in culture. The outcome of the hero’s journey reinforces the natural determinism underlying the view of life expressed within the tale. As the author suggests while depicting

³While quoting from *The ugly duckling*, I rely on a translation carried out by Erik Haugaard, recognized as one of the most faithful to the original text. Nevertheless, the statement quoted above comes from a version translated by R.P. Keigwin, because Haugaard’s translation does not include the part marked in italics. As a result of this omission, the universalistic appeal of Andersen’s assertion is not rendered.

animals as an allegory of people, a human's position in society is defined entirely by the law of heredity and family background. On the one hand, "the ugly duckling's" story contradicts the restraining influence of social inheritance. On the other hand, it underscores the value of climbing the social ladder at one's own effort. In fact, Andersen pictures the society as a strictly hierarchichal and inherently static structure, where the privilege to move upwards is reserved for the socially misplaced nobility. And yet, in the light of the author's account, this is not something to be complained about. Judging by the tireless persistence, with which Andersen strived to gain the acceptance of his upper-class benefactors, the writer himself was a man of strong will and strategic mind, both of which made it possible for his talent to break through. In the romantic era, however, the concept of the self-made-man was not yet appealing enough. Hence, inspired by the idealised stories cherished within his family, Andersen preferred to attribute his success to a myth, according to which the author was in fact an impoverished descendant of nobility (de Mylius 1996: 18-19), just like "the ugly duckling."

As it stems from his memoirs, as well as other stories, e.g. *Emperor's new clothes* or *The little match girl*, Andersen's first-hand experience of the upper classes was full of mixed feelings and critical reflections. According to the biographer Jens Andersen, in spite of the social promotion the author's critical instinct was never blunted. While staying true to his proletarian origins, he studied the high spheres at a close distance and "weaved them into his tales in all their falseness" (Andersen 2003: 82-90). In *The ugly duckling*, however, Andersen's commitment to the poor is somewhat weakened. In terms of morality, the society image developed in the tale rests upon a highly simplistic black-and-white division, where those trapped at the bottom of the social structure incarnate misery and deprivation, whereas those on its top exhibit nothing but glory and virtue. Remarkably enough, the only ones displaying positive qualities in the tale are: the eponymous duckling, of whom the narrator speaks with unhidden empathy and never actually describes as "ugly," but "poor"; the swans, referred to as "the royal birds," "beautiful and happy," and the children at the manor house, whose joyful behaviour completes the idyllic scenery at the very end of the tale. By contrast, everyone else the duckling meets before he reaches the old manor house becomes a target of the narrator's irony. No matter whether it is the hostile environment of the duckyard, or the characters actually providing shelter for the hero on the way, all of them are presented as equally narrow-minded, judgemental and intolerant, and yet painfully egocentric and self-important. Branded as an allegory of Andersen's life, *The ugly duckling* is in fact a projection of the author's personal view of himself, clearly marked by his regrets and ambitions, the idealism of his era, as well as its class-

determined social dynamics. While confronted with the social values of the present era, the moral of the story, which clearly discredits the poor and idealises the wealthy, loses its universal appeal, unless it gets revised against the new premises of existence.

The ugly girl vs The ugly duckling

As soon as in 1894, Andersen’s idealist view of nature as being superior to culture was challenged by Henrik Pontoppidan, one of the Danish Noble Prize winners (1917), and one of the main representants of the modern breakthrough era. Pontoppidan considered the romantic writing style as detached from reality and distorting the truth about the hardships of existence. Highly critical of the idealism of the romantic period, he approaches Andersen’s tale as a naturalist, aiming to identify the scientific laws that influence the course of human existence. In a short story entitled *Eagle’s flight* (*Ørneflugt*), the author pictures the tragic fate of Claus, an eagle raised among ducks and hens. One day, driven by a struck of longing for what seems to be his right element, Claus flies away from the comfort of his accustomed surroundings, but right after, having confronted the intimidating forces of nature, he decides to come back to the duckyard. While approaching what he acknowledges to be his true home, unsophisticated and predictable, but safe, cosy and caring, the runaway is mistaken for a wild eagle preying on the poultry, as a result of which he gets shot. In his explicit polemics with the *The ugly duckling*, Pontoppidan reverses Andersen’s concept of identity from the perspective of social determinism, asserting the primacy of culture over nature: “It avails but little to have come from an eagle’s egg, if one is raised in the poultry yard” (Pontoppidan 1929: 558).

Almost a hundred years later, Andersen’s understanding of the nature-culture divide is still what lies in focus of the authors offering critical reinterpretations of the tale. In *The ugly girl*, whose title leaves no doubt about the underlying intertext, Peter Fogtdal transposes Andersen’s story into the Danish reality of the 1990’s, when the class-bound hierarchy of the romantic era is a thing of the past, but the society stays just as vividly divided due to other factors, such as economic status and lifestyle. Along with the social context, Fogtdal changes the gender of the ugly duckling-figure from male to female. In the light of the transformation that the main character undergoes, this latter change is a significant one, as it opens up for a gender-critical reading of the tale, drawing attention to the objectification of women in the modern society.

Peter Fogtdal depicts a clash between two extremes composing the social milieu of Copenhagen. In his revision, Andersen's duckyard finds its equivalent among the working-class margins of Nørrebro, a district known for its multicultural society and frequent police interventions. Abstracting from the former aspect, the author depicts Nørrebro as a place defined by mediocrity, misery and crime, where "people were simple and threw bricks at the police / folk var simple og smed murbrokker efter politiet" (Fogtdal 1996: 20) - a clear opposite of the glamorous jet set milieu gathered at the so-called café Victor, which "the ugly duckling" in its revised version regularly approaches and admires. Peter Fogtdal's depiction of life on the social margins is full of ironic detachment, but the primary target of his criticism is the superficial consumerism of the yuppie-culture symbolised by the café:

Café Victor was such a nice place. It was summertime, and beautiful young men were drinking cappuccino and smiling automatically at photomodels. Nobody heard what the others were saying, but it was fine, for one could always look at oneself in the mirror / Der var så smukt inde på café Victor. Det var sommer, og smarte unge mænd drak cappuccino og smilte automatisk til fotomodeller. Der var ingen, der kunne høre, hvad der blev sagt, men det gjorde ikke noget, thi man kunne altid spejle sig. (Fogtdal 1996: 19)

In terms of social position, the urban elite attending café Victor constitutes a counterpart to Andersen's "royal birds," but the similarity between the two representations is only partial. In both texts, the notion of high social status is strictly combined with the quality of exterior beauty, but while Andersen sees the latter as a reflection of inner virtues, in Fogtdal's rendition, beauty is just a shell hiding an emotional and intellectual void of its possessors.

As expected, the margins of Nørrebro constitute a point of origin and departure for the main character in Fogtdal's revision, "en forsagt lille pige / a shy little girl" referred to as "the ugly girl," whereas café Victor is her final destination. As opposed to the original, the girl is a legitimate descendant of the lower working class, born into a family of an uncultivated boilermaker living in one of the Nørrebro-district's dingy apartment blocks. In terms of looks, defined by old jeans with holes and greasy hair, the girl complies perfectly well with the standards ruling in her neighbourhood. Being ugly is in fact a quality the character attributes to herself upon having confronted the society gathered at the café. Its glass walls serve as a social mirror, enhancing all the misery of the character's position. In Fogtdal's rendition, ugliness is not just a temporary characteristic of the evolving exterior, but a permanent state of mind. Triggered by arbitrary factors beyond the character's control, in this case, the way in which her social position is perceived by the world outside, it affects self-perception, causing feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Sticking

to the detached perspective of the narrative, the narrator in Fogtdal’s revision does not refrain from calling the main character as “ugly,” but the way in which it is done clearly conveys the social judgement lying behind:

It was the ugly girl. ... she had no self-confidence, because her father was a boilermaker / Det var den grimme kælling. ... hun havde ingen selvtillid, da hendes far var klejnsmed. (Fogtdal 1996: 19, 20)

The experience of inferiority rendered in Fogtdal’s revision is motivated differently than in Andersen’s tale. The instinctive sense of misfitting is here replaced with a deeply conscious urge to fit in. Hence, the actions of the main character take a different course. The journey undertaken by “the ugly girl” is informed by a view of life which contradicts Andersen’s understanding of personal growth as a unification process, leading up to self-revelation about one’s authentic personal and social identity. The frame of reference for the reality of existence depicted by Fogtdal is what has been diagnosed as the “postmodern condition,” identified by rejection of social customs legitimized by the so-called “grand narratives” (Lyotard 1991), as well as questioning the universalist concepts of human nature and the objective truth about it. Disillusioned as it is with regard to the idealism of Andersen’s era, the postmodern outlook on life leaves one with the freedom, or burden, to shape one’s life by one’s own effort and according to one’s own moral convictions, all of which finds reflection in the transformation process depicted by Fogtdal.

In terms of character construction, the main difference between the two tales concerns the notion of agency. Just like “the ugly duckling,” Fogtdal’s protagonist dreams about becoming a member of high society, but while her predecessor considers it as nothing but wishful thinking, “the ugly girl” pursues her wish in spite of being scorned and rejected due to the stigma of her social background. Living in the world, where the notion of “nature” has been regarded as yet another consumer product of “culture,” “the ugly girl” takes it upon herself to buy herself entrance into the world she aspires to:

The ugly duckling

“Oh! It could not forget those beautiful, happy birds How could it think of wishing to possess such loveliness as they had?” (Andersen 2009: 258).

Den grimme kælling

“Oh how beautiful they all are But one day when I get rich enough, you shall see ... / Ih hvor er de smukke alle sammen Men en dag når jeg får råd, så skal I bare se” (Fogtdal 1996: 20)

Just as it happens for Andersen’s hero, the personal transformation of Fogtdal’s protagonist involves critical changes in her general appearance.

Contrary to the source tale, however, the fact that “the ugly girl” changes into “a beautiful woman with bleached hair, protruding breasts and suntanned elbows / en smuk kvinde med afbleget hår, struttende bryster og solbrune albuer” (Fogtdal 1996: 23) is not an inevitable part of a natural maturation process, but an aftermath of a series of plastic surgeries the hero undergoes of her own accord. In order to be able to fund her project, “the ugly girl” becomes a drug-addicted prostitute. On the one hand, the route she chooses can be seen as a caricature of the moral relativism attributed to the postmodern society, in the light of which no moral choices are objectively right or wrong. On the other hand, it draws attention to the broadly understood costs one might need to pay while climbing the social ladder from its very bottom to the top. By describing the character’s occupation as “the only way out / den eneste udvej” (Fogtdal 1996: 21), the author implies that the principle of equal opportunity, cherished as a social ideal today, does not fully secure the freedom from the impact of one’s social history.

In terms of Propp’s classification, the character created by Fogtdal proves much more capable of performing the hero function than the original ugly duckling. Rather than driven by extraneous circumstances, “the ugly girl” reaches her final destination as a result of her own endurance and persistence. While replicating the strenuous reality of “the ugly duckling’s” journey, the author changes the hero’s response to the suffering and humiliation experienced on the way from surrender to rebellion:

The ugly duckling

“Poor thing! ... it ... only hoped to obtain leave to lie among the reeds and drink some of the swamp water.” (Andersen 2009: 254)

The ugly girl

“And while she was looking out over the polluted waves, she swore to herself that enough was enough. She would be just like them.” (Fogtdal 1996: 21)

What the two characters do have in common is the fact that none of them develops mentally. During her final attempt to get accepted into the society of café Victor, Fogtdal’s protagonist looks nothing like her old self, but feels just as insecure as she did before:

“The ugly girl” before

“If only I dared go in there, she thought, but didn’t do it, because she had no self-confidence / Bare jeg turde gå derind, tænkte hun men gjorde det ikke, for hun havde ingen selvtillid.” (Fogtdal 1996: 20)

“The ugly girl” after

“Will they though accept her? ... She went in with her heart in her throat / Ville de mon acceptere hende? ... Hun trådte ind med hjertet i halsen.” (Fogtdal 1996: 22)

In Andersen’s version, “the ugly duckling” enters the flock of swans while staying true to his authentic self: humble, insecure, and defenceless. Fogtdal’s protagonist, on the other hand, does the complete opposite:

The ugly duckling

“Kill me’, said the poor creature, and bent its head down upon the water, expecting nothing but death.” (Andersen 2009: 260)

The ugly girl

“The ugly girl looked at all of them and made sure she didn’t smile, for joy of life is not something welcome, when you visit the proper places in town / Den grimme kælling kiggede gennem alle og sørgede for ikke at smile, thi livsglæde hører ingen steder hjemme, når man går de rigtige steder i byen.” (Fogtdal 1996: 22)

In order to assert her newly-developed upper-class demeanour, the hero puts on a mask of cold, self-confident arrogance, entirely at odds with her actual state of mind. Nevertheless, the long-pursued dream finally comes true. The stigmatizing label is taken away and “the ugly girl, who no longer was an ugly girl,” gets to enjoy life while engaging in “stupid things the rich and beautiful are free to do” (Fogtdal 1996: 23).

The motto, in which Andersen pays tribute to nature as being superior to culture has been transformed by Fogtdal as follows:

Imagine being a daughter of a boilermaker and still being admired by people with B-tax / Tænk at vær datter af en klejnsmed og alligevel blive beundret af folk med B-skat. (Fogtdal 1996: 23)

Rather than asserting the power of fate, the adverb “still / alligevel” refers here to the effort the hero was compelled to make in order to arrive at her dream destination. In his revision, Peter Fogtdal denies the original with regard to its view of nature as an innate disposition, which determines the course of life. The lack of self-confidence that characterises “the ugly girl” is irreversible despite the change of circumstances, and yet, it is socially-determined. In that way, the author pictures human nature as a product of culture, no matter how deeply imprinted and change-resistant it might be. Moreover, nature’s supremacy over culture is contradicted by the fact that the hero’s inner state of mind proves to be of no importance for her ultimate social ascent. At the same time, the image of culture emerging from the author’s revision is full of bitter scepticism. The blatant irony that permeates his rendition of the hero’s journey discredits the Danish society as materialistic, superficial and morally corrupt all the way through: from top to bottom. After all, in its revised version, “the ugly duckling” gets to

experience the depravity of the social elites first-hand, and yet, she still craves to follow in their footsteps. Given the sarcastic bitterness of Fogtdal's account, the actual target of the author's critique seems doubtful: is it the view of life expressed in Andersen's tale, or is it the new reality it has been transposed into? In fact, it is both.

Conclusion

As noted by Christina Bacchilega, postmodern revisions of traditional fairy tales are manifold with regard to their purpose, which goes beyond simply scrutinizing and denying the existential credibility of their sources (Bacchilega 1997: 50). Her view of revisionary fairy-tale fiction as simultaneously rejecting and embracing the literary heritage of classic fairy tales finds reflection in the way, in which Peter Fogtdal concludes his take on *The ugly duckling*. At the very end of his reworking, the author poses a question, which makes the tale open to interpretation, both with regard to its moral message as an individual piece of work, as well as its intertextual relation to the original:

See, it was a true story, but did it actually have a moral? Se, det var en rigtig historie, men havde den mon en morale? (Fogtdal 1996: 23)

Quite admittedly, by referring to his own, revised version of Andersen's story as "true," the author underscores the existential credibility of the original. Nevertheless, his conclusion is not an arbitrary judgement in terms of "right or wrong," but a statement based on an evaluation of the social mechanisms functioning today.

On the basis of Fogtdal's revision it can be argued that "the ugly duckling's" journey, depicted as an aimless drifting towards a prearranged position within a preestablished social hierarchy, does not comply with the modern belief in the creative power of human agency. At the same time, however, the course of the journey undertaken by "the ugly girl" discredits the principle of the self-made individual as yet another myth, equally disconnected from the social reality of the present era, whose condition is the main focus of the author's critical attention. By encouraging the reader to rethink the message of Andersen's tale, Fogtdal's revision inspires a qualitative change in its reception: from a child's fable, promoting the virtues of tolerance and kindness, to a social commentary, outdated with regard to its understanding of the relationship between individual and society. *The ugly girl* is an exemplary piece of revisionary fiction, where a well-known classic is entered from a new angle, so that its existential appeal can be revived. By doing so,

Peter Fogtdal reasserts the power of variation, intrinsic to the fairy-tale genre right from its oral origins, as a result of which hardly any classic fairy tale exists in a fixed form, but most of them still respond to the changing conditions of existence.

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**“The Art of Flying High” — Peter Fogtdal on Hans Christian Andersen’s
The Ugly Duckling in the Light of the Postmodern Reality of Existence**

Abstract

As noticed by some of the most acknowledged scholars of the genre, fairy tales have enjoyed an explosive popularity in the second half of the twentieth century, both in Western Europe and North America. At the same time, rather than asserting the universal appeal of the fairy-tale tradition, the majority of contemporary writers inspired by classic fairy tales stay focused on testing the relevance of their sources by revising traditional plots, characters and images against the backdrop of contemporary existence. In the present paper, the practice of literary revision is explored as one of the most recent and innovative strategies within the intertextual use of fairy-tale motifs drawn from the literary oeuvre of the Danish fairy-tale master Hans Christian Andersen. As an illustrative example of this approach, I examine a short story entitled *The ugly girl* (*Den grimme kælling*, 1996), by a contemporary Danish writer Peter Fogtdal, which is a postmodern take on *The ugly duckling* (*Den grimme ælling*, 1843). The article discusses the main aspects of Fogtdal’s revision, centered around the way, in which Andersen renders the relation between individual and society, as reflected in his depiction of the hero, as well as his understanding of the nature-culture dichotomy. Preceded by an outline of the view of life conveyed in Andersen’s autobiographical writings, the analysis seeks to identify, to what extend the existential truths expressed in *The ugly duckling* are challenged in Fogtdal’s revision, contributing to a change in its further reception.

Keywords: fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen, intertextuality, postmodernism, revision, *The ugly duckling*.