

“The Dryad” by Hans Christian Andersen: A Fairy Tale on Modern Times and The World Exhibition of 1867

Anne-Marie Mai

Department for Literature, Culture and Media, University of Southern Denmark — Kolding
Hedebovej 84, 5474 Veflinge, Denmark
Email: ammai@litcul.sdu.dk

Abstract The article relates how 1867 was an eventful year for Andersen: he was made honorary citizen of his home town, Odense, Denmark, and endowed with the title of councillor of state, a title that pleased him especially because he viewed it as an opportunity to play the role of modern artist in the company of monarchs and wealthy patrons as well as the common people. Andersen enjoyed travelling as it further enhanced his exposure to the public eye, and he visited the World Exhibition of 1867 in Paris, where he felt out of place, finding everything strange and estranging, and he wrote a fairy tale about the Exhibition, “The Dryad”. Mai shows how Andersen’s papercuts also depict the negative side of modernity, and how the fairy tale is really an epistemological genre expressing dreams and longing, but in the reverse, since “The Dryad” and “The little Mermaid” are about spirits that long for the human world. Mai notes that Andersen was portrayed in a small porcelain figure manufactured in 1812; the figure expresses the writer’s dreams of freedom and writing as well as his bourgeois cultural refinement. Andy Warhol’s portrait of Andersen from 1987 shows how the dream of freedom of Romanticism permeates the artist’s work, and the Danish sculptor Bjarne Nørregaard’s statue from 2005, placed in Odense, expresses three conflicting aspects of Andersen’s personality: the writer, the traveller and the self-doubting modern artist. On the whole, Andersen’s life and work are strikingly modern.

Key words World Exhibition of 1867; alienation; modernity

The year 1867 was a very pleasant and eventful one in Hans Christian Andersen’s life. He visited the World Exposition in Paris; he went to Switzerland and he was made titular councillor of state by the king; in December he was also made an honorary citizen of Odense, where he had been born in 1805. He was especially happy about being made a councillor of state, because he felt this title increased his esteem among his wealthy patrons and the literary critics.

The poor boy from Odense who as a child had dreamed of fame and glory had finally been honoured and recognised as an artist and an international celebrity. His dream had come true. For Hans Christian Andersen, being a modern artist on the

market implied the ability to perform as an artist to a public of monarchs as well as of working citizens, to make friends with artists and poets of several nations, to be closely related to wealthy patrons, to stay in touch with journalists and literary critics and yet be an eccentric genius. Andersen mastered the role of a modern artist extremely well and he loved playing the part. He kept company with kings and princes, was invited to workers' associations and made appearances at collections and charity events.

As a modern artist and poet Andersen travelled all over Europe to stay in contact with colleagues, publishers and mentors and he loved to travel simply to experience culture, history and nature. In one of his autobiographies *The Fairy Tale of My Life* (1855/1975) he writes about how he felt unappreciated in Denmark, longed to see the world, and where the unfamiliar acquired a gleam of peace: "To travel is to live" (*Mit Livs Eventyr* 301).

His travels did not only gladden his heart and give him peace of mind, however. He was inspired by his travels to write novels, travel books, journals and fairytales and he also recorded his many impressions in small drawings. These drawings captured impressions and moods and, like his diaries, can be considered as travel notes. Andersen often travelled by coach and by train. He was fascinated by that modern mode of transportation, the train, referring to it as the fire dragon — although he also hopefully imagined a future with steam-propelled flying machines!¹

When he went to Paris in 1867 to visit the World Exposition, he went by train. He also loved the train's immense speed — it travelled at 30 km an hour!

The World Exposition and "The Dryad"

The 1867 World Exposition came about at the initiative of the French Emperor Napoleon III. The institution itself dates back to 1756, when the first international fair was held in London, and throughout the 19th century there were at certain intervals world exhibitions for trade, art, industry and science in Europe, New Zealand and Australia. At the French Exposition Universelle, it was decided to locate the exposition on the large military parade ground in Paris, the Champ de Mars, and around the area a huge pavilion was erected, surrounded by gardens and a number of smaller exhibition buildings. The exposition was the largest ever seen, comprising more than 50,000 exhibitors from all over the world, and it attracted over 9 million visitors. The exposition led to the art and culture of foreign countries coming within the compass of Europe, whose visual artists and writers were inspired by what the exposition could display from, in particular, China and Japan. The exposition provided completely new insight into oriental art. It was open from 1 April to 31 October.

Hans Christian Andersen visited the exhibition from April 15 to May 9 and enjoyed it very much. He was interested in modern technology, industry and lifestyle — but he was also critical and sceptical regarding modernity and urbanisation. In his letters, Hans Christian Andersen tells his friends of his thoughts and impressions, but he also wrote a fairytale about the exposition, "The Dryad" (1868). Andersen was actually spurred on to write the fairytale by a Danish journal that had stated that only the English novelist Charles Dickens would be able to express the spirit of the world

exposition artistically². “The Dryad” opens like this:

We’re going to Paris to see the exposition!

Now we’re there! It was a speedy journey, done completely without witchcraft — we went by steam, in a ship and on a railroad. Our time is indeed a time of fairy tales.

Now we are in a large hotel in the middle of Paris. The staircase is decorated with flowers, and soft carpets are spread over the steps. Our room is pleasant; the balcony door is open, and we can look out onto a large square. Down there is spring, which has come to Paris, having arrived at the same time we did, in the form of a big, young chestnut tree with delicate leaves beginning to open. How much more richly that tree is dressed in the beauty of spring than the other trees on the square! One of them has stepped out of the row of living trees and lies on the ground with its roots torn up. Where that tree stood the young chestnut will be planted, and there it will grow. (“Dryad”)

“The Dryad” tells the story of this young chestnut tree. This tree is the home of a natural spirit, the dryad, and she and her tree live in a small peaceful French village where the priest is teaching a flock of children in the shade of a beautiful old oak tree. The priest tells the children about France’s glorious history and the country as the cradle of freedom. Stories of the great world exposition also reach the small village, and the dryad longs to see the great world the priest is talking but also warning about: the great world is full of dangers and young girls who venture out into it can easily meet with misfortune and moral depravity. The dryad dreams about visiting the great metropolis of Paris — and her wishes come true. Her tree is dug up and placed on a small square in Paris. At first the dryad is very happy with these new surroundings. There is plenty to see and keep tracks of. After a short while, however, she starts to feel bored. She longs to be able to leave her tree and experience the big city and the world exposition. This wish can be fulfilled, but at a deadly cost: the dryad will die after just one day in the city. But her wish is too strong. The dryad begs higher spiritual powers to be allowed to leave her tree:

Take from me all my years of life and grant me but half of a May fly’s life! Free me from my prison; give me human life and human happiness, though it be but for a fleeting moment, for only this one night, and then punish me, if you wish, for my longing for life! Free me, even if this dwelling of mine, this fresh young tree, wither, be cut down, turned to ashes, and blown away by the winds! (“Dryad”)

And suddenly the dryad is free of her tree and enters the world of the city as a lovely young woman that resembles a spring goddess. In her beautiful clothes she visits the boulevards, the shops, the churches, the restaurants, the ballrooms and even the sewers, which are said to be the real wonder of the modern world. In the Madeleine

Church she sees the elegantly dressed women kneeling at the altar or going to confession. The dryad notices that, as a natural spirit, she does not really belong there. And the service is like a piece of elegant theatre, where rich men and women display themselves for others instead of being taken up with their devotion. The dryad hurries away and descends into the most modern feature of the city — the sewers, where the rats live their life. But the rats are sceptical about modernity and progress. The garbage of old times was better — modernity is too clean for a rat and the citizens of the big city make too much noise. The dryad hurries off to a ballroom, where many lightly clad women are dancing. The ball is radiantly beautiful, but those dancing are taken up with themselves; they also seem to be almost hypnotised and poisoned by all the pleasures. Later that night, the dryad visits the world exposition, but her time is quickly drawing to an end. When daylight comes, she will die. And she can already notice the weariness that is creeping up on her:

She felt a yearning to rest on the soft Oriental cushions and carpets, or to duck into the clear water as did the branches of the weeping willow. But the May fly has no rest. In a few minutes the day would end. Her thoughts and her limbs trembled, and she sank in the grass beside the babbling stream. “You spring from the earth with eternal life,” she said. “Cool my tongue; give me a refreshing drink!” (“Dryad”)

But the fountain is artificial and mechanical and is incapable of giving the dryad thirst-quenching water. The grass too rejects her. If it is picked, it dies. And the light breeze only promises to lay dust over the dryad when she is dead and herself becomes dust:

The dryad felt a terror creep over her, like a woman who, bleeding to death in the bath from a severed artery, still wishes to live, while her strength gradually leaves her from loss of blood. She rose, staggered a few steps forward, and then sank again before a little church. The door was open; a light burned on the altar, and the organ sounded. What music! (“Dryad”)

The song from the small church is no consolation, however, for it tells the dryad that she has allowed herself to be plucked out of the context into which God had placed her and that she now must die. The wind also announces her demise, and she finally falls as a dew drop into the morning light. All that is left of the dryad is a small chestnut blossom that will soon be trampled into the dust by the many visitors to the world exposition. Andersen ends his tale with an ambiguous conclusion: “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” (“Dryad”).

The story of the dryad shows not only that the times are great and wonderful but also that modernity is a dangerous, deadly fairytale. The many pleasures lead to depravity. Nature is exploited by mankind, the roots of creation are pulled up, and the balance between mankind, nature, belief and spirit — which existed in the small vil-

lage where the dryad grew up — is destroyed. Modernity is a paradox of loss, depravity, unrest, amusement and cruelty. Here the beautiful art of storytelling, which the old priest masters, has slipped into the background as a form of culture and experience, while the modern gaze — ‘we saw it with our very eyes’ — with which people constantly seek surprises and pleasure in the colourful outside world dominates as a form of experience.

Hans Christian Andersen was not only a writer. He also worked with various genres of the visual arts, including papercutting. Here too he depicts modernity as a new human basis of existence. One of Hans Christian Andersen’s papercuts shows a white clown with a wide-open mouth that seems to have stiffened in fear and is almost reminiscent of the picture “The Scream” (1893) by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. The clown is carrying a tray with city buildings; at tower, a mill, a church and some houses and a swan. The papercut is an allegory of fragile modernity based on such unknown and somewhat frightening forces as the white clown/the plasterer — a figure that simultaneously represents modern entertainment culture and death itself. But the swan is still part of the picture as a reminder of art and the importance of the fairytale. Precisely the fairytale can perhaps maintain modernity’s paradox of cruelty and pleasure and cause the reader to think about modern life-forms and their consequences.

The fairytale is an epistemological genre — it places existence in relief and appeals to people’s own critical sense and capacity for experience. The tale of “The Dryad” is often compared with the tale “The Little Mermaid” (1837)³. Both describe a female natural spirit that longs to go beyond her own universe and perishes as a result of meeting the human world. But while “The Dryad” is primarily a tale that criticises civilisation and modernity, ‘The Little Mermaid’ is an existentialist tale about love. What the two tales perhaps share is a critical questioning of the great idea of longing and dream that characterises European Romanticism — and that Andersen himself helps to shape and develop. It is also thought-provoking that while Romantic writers often long to be part of the spiritual realm of nature and hope to glimpse beauty and truth here, in “The Dryad” and “The Little Mermaid” it is the spiritual world that longs for the human world and, with fatal consequences, struggles to gain access to it.

“The Dryad” was later the subject of a stimulating artistic adaptation in a one-man dramatic performance by the Canadian artist Robert Lepage called “The Andersen Project” (2005). Robert Lepage (b. 1957) shifts the action 100 years on to Paris in 1967, including the artistic problems of his own age, where art easily becomes the victim of market considerations and project-making activities.

At the Shanghai World Exposition in 2010, many of the visitors had an opportunity of seeing the statue of The Little Mermaid at the Danish stand and be reminded of Hans Christian Andersen and his fairytale. If Andersen, who hurried to the world exposition in Paris, had been alive today, he would without a doubt like to have joined in the many festivities in Shanghai. The actual exposition in 2010 opens under the motto “Better City/Better Life”, and if one allows oneself to read “The Dryad” and “The Little Mermaid” in the light of this motto, one can say that “The Dryad” indi-

rectly expresses the hope of a better city, while “The Little Mermaid” fantasises about the wish for a better life.

Hans Christian Andersen at the World Exposition

As a European celebrity, it was natural for Hans Christian Andersen to visit and make an appearance at the World Exposition in Paris in 1867. In his diary and letters one can follow how he spends hours at the exposition, is worn out by the many impressions, but remarks at the same time that he does not feel himself completely overwhelmed. He writes that on the Champ de Mars it looks as if each of the many buildings has left its usual place. They have been pasted on one another and do not really make any impression on him. After a few days at the exposition, he finally finds a linguistic image that can express his experience. In a letter to Mathilde Ørsted dated 22 April 1867 he writes: “I seem to be walking like a pygmy on a large table with enormous knickknacks from every nation of the world.”⁴ The image of the world as a tray that Andersen created in his papercut now emerges here in a slightly different version — he himself has been added in the form of a pygmy! He specially visits the Chinese house at the exposition, but it disappointed him: “Went into the Chinese house — it cost half a franc and there is nothing to see here. I did not even see a Chinaman [...]” (*Hans Christian Andersen's Diaries* 278), he notes in his diary on 2 May.⁵

However, Andersen does not simply concentrate on what to him are the most exotic features of the exhibition. He is also extremely preoccupied with how his own writings are being presented and celebrated at the exposition. He notices that his books at the British stand are beautifully bound and remarks that this is truly an excellent idea. Some of the known contemporary writers have had their bust put on display, but his bust is lacking, even though he seems to recall that the organisers had asked to have a marble bust of him. He is even more put out because the bust of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832 – 1910) has arrived and now seems to be the only one that represents Denmark.

Andersen carefully notes the readers and critics who praise him, and happily relates that an American lady knows his works, while another one asks for his autograph and a third recognises him from his portrait. During all the many diversions and amusements and quick glimpses at the Parisian underworld, he feels ill, agitated and dissatisfied with both the world and himself.

Andersen really gives the impression of being a modern, cosmopolitan writer and celebrity, familiar with both spleen and a fragmented personality — and someone who consciously works on his own image, making sure he is in the public eye, giving interviews and allowing himself to be suitably celebrated with champagne, pièces d'occasion and hurrahs.

One notices how meticulously Andersen watches over his public esteem. And this ambition he takes with him everywhere he goes, also where he is a guest at the Nordic Exposition in Copenhagen in 1872. On 17 June 1872, he notes in his diary: “One thing vexed me at the exposition. Here, as in Paris, my bust was absent, which those of all the other writers and especially, as in Paris, that of Bjørnson were

present. I existed in chocolate, so it was also possible to nibble away at me” (*Hans Christian Andersen’s Diaries* 299). Modern life as an artist and writer could quite literally be exposed to being nibbled and salivated over by the public!

Is Hans Christian Andersen a celebrity whose staging of his own life ends up being more exciting than his art, as has happened with some of the European and American writers of the 20th century? No one — either now or then — that in Andersen’s case there was always an artistic basis for his fame: the fairytales, which in 1867 Andersen was far from finished with. Andersen, though, knew how to get his two texts — the fairytales and the story of his life — to have a synergic effect on and to promote each other in a way that later theoretical discussions of the writer’s relation to his work are beginning to be aware of.⁶

Hans Christian Andersen’s tales have been refashioned as illustrated books, strip cartoons and films. Even though some of the interpretations and new versions can be extremely heavy-handed, Andersen’s texts and their reputation would seem to be capable of surviving most things. And they continue to be retranslated into many languages.

Andersen himself as a writer has also been depicted and interpreted in many ways, not only as a marble bust and as a piece of chocolate, as at the 1872 exposition. Andersen has been depicted, for example, as a fine small porcelain figure from The Royal Danish Porcelain Manufactory in 1912. Here he is shown as a spick-and-span, well-brought-up young man politely bowing to the onlooker. He is holding a top hat out in front of him with his left hand, while his right hand, which he conceals behind his back, is clutching some pages of manuscript. The porcelain figure in its delicate shades of grey presents the image of the young Andersen holding on tight to his dream of becoming a writer and his longing for freedom, whilst also acquiring the virtues of bourgeois cultural refinement. Andersen has also been portrayed in 1987 by the American pop-artist Andy Warhol (1928 – 1987), who, basing himself on a photograph of the writer, produces a large blue-coloured portrait, underlining the idea that the blue poetics⁷ and the dream of freedom of Romanticism permeate everything in Andersen’s life and works.

On the occasion of the bicentenary of Hans Christian Andersen’s birth in 2005, the Danish artist Bjørn Nørgaard created the eight-metre-high statue *the shadow, the Travelling Companion and the Improvisatore — a three-in-one portrait of Hans Christian Andersen*, which has been erected in Andersen’s native city, Odense. Bjørn Nørgaard writes the following about interpreting the writer as three figures:

I see Andersen as a highly complex person, a split personality, where travelling and his writing give him an identity now within himself but outside himself — and that is extremely modern. So I cannot make a single sculpture of him, but choose instead a sculpture where Andersen meets himself — as a writer, as a travelling companion, as a man who, deep down, has doubts about himself. This three-in-oneness, this trinity, between the genius, the searcher, traveller, the unhappy and doubting man that all of today can probably recognise, is then the motif for a present-day interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen which is

neither a Romantic idealisation nor a realistic illusion, but an image superimposed on an image on an image on an image. . . a recognition of the fact that we build on layer upon layer of possible interpretations of Hans Christian Andersen. (Nørgaard)

The foundation for the many possible conceptions of Hans Christian Andersen was perhaps laid by the writer himself with his three different autobiographies: the German *Das Märchen meines Lebens ohne Dichtung* (*The True Story of My Life* 1847), the Danish *Mit Livs Eventyr* (*The Fairy Tale of my Life*, 1855) and *Levnedsbogen* (“Reminiscences” [Autobiography]), written as early as 1832, but only rediscovered and published in 1926.

Andersen does not provide a fixed interpretation of his own life. Like a modern artist, he considers the recipient and the context in these autobiographies. He does not break the autobiographical pact between the reader and writer that there is an identity between the empirical writer and the ‘I-figure’ of the autobiographies. But the I-figure can vary in angle and focus, and there is clearly a distance between the written I-figure and the empirical author. As the contemporary French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud (1854 – 1891) expressed it: “For I is someone else/Je est un autre”.⁸

Both Hans Christian Andersen’s tales and the story of his life are modern narratives from a world in motion and subject to change, both of them full of hope, despair, disappointment, beauty and a longing for freedom. In his own time, Andersen was a celebrity, known for his ability to realise his own strong longing for personal freedom, despite all social barriers and ties, and to become an artist of the first water.

And we still have the artist’s works, not least in the form of the world-famous fairytales, but both the tales and Andersen’s interpretation of himself and his destiny are things we will never exhaust. And yet another cubit has been added to the stature of Hans Christian Andersen and his fairytales when the sculpture of his little mermaid visits the Shanghai World Exposition in 2010 and is actually a great success. That story Andersen would have loved to turn into a modern fairytale!

Notes

1. The tale, “Thousands of Years from Now”, 1853, opens with the sentence: “Yes, thousands of years from now men will fly on wings of steam through the air, across the ocean. The young inhabitants of America will visit old Europe”. Cf. Jean Hersholt’s translation at the address: <http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/ThousandsOfYearsFromNow.html>
2. Cf. Jørgen Erik Nielsen: *Dickens i Danmark* (København : Museum Tusulanums forlag, Københavns universitet, 2009) 221.
3. See for example Johan de Mylius’ comments in his portrait of Hans Christian Andersen the author at the Archive for Danish Literature http://adl.dk/adl_pub/fportraet/cv/ShowFpItem.xsql?ff_id=22&p_fpkat_id=indl&nnoc=adl_pub.
4. Letters from and to Hans Christian Andersen can be found at the H. C. Andersen Centre database, see the letter to Mathilde Ørsted at the address: <http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/brevbase/brev>.

htmløbid = 18799&s = 369701e16d33232b00f8dc05be3cdcd3&st0 = Pygm% E6&f0 = 127. Mathilde Ørsted (1824-1906) was the daughter of the natural scientist H. C. Ørsted.

5. *Hans Christian Andersen's Diaries 1866 – 1867*. Accessible electronically at the address: [Http://base.kb.dk/hca_pub/cv/main/Page.xsql?nnoc=hca_pub&p_VolNo=7&p_PageNo=277&p_mode=text](http://base.kb.dk/hca_pub/cv/main/Page.xsql?nnoc=hca_pub&p_VolNo=7&p_PageNo=277&p_mode=text).

6. In the contemporary Nordic literary debate, the relation between the actual, the biographical and the fictive in fictional and autobiographical texts is much discussed. John Helt Haarder provides a fine introduction to this discussion and its sources in French poststructuralism and American performativity theory in the article “The special relation we had to the author. Towards a concept of performative biographism”, *Norsk Litteraturvitenskapelig Tidsskrift*, 1 (2005): 2 – 16. The theme of Andersen role as a writer is also dealt with in detail in Jens Andersen's biography, *Hans Christian Andersen: A New Life* (Tiina Nunnally; Overlook Duckworth, 2005).

7. The blue colour of the Warhol picture refers to the conception of the Romantic blue flower. The German writer Novalis, in his novel fragment, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) made a deep-blue flower the symbol of the Romantic longing to experience truth and beauty. The blue colour also has a particular symbolic value for Warhol's own generation of beat poets and musicians.

8. Arthur Rimbaud's so-called visionary letter of 15 May 1871 with the line “Je est un autre”, can be read in the original at the address: <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/Documents1.html#Demeny>

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