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Tootle

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ENGLISH 4710

PAPER #2

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TOOTLE

I recently remarked to my wife Kathryn that I had to pause briefly at a railroad crossing on my way home to allow the passage of the shortest train I had ever seen--an engine pulling three cars. In such circumstances I am accustomed to passing the moments by counting the number of cars, which ordinarily runs in excess of 80-- sometimes over 100 with a sufficient amount of engine power. It may say something about how accustomed we have become to the efficiencies wrought by the Industrial Revolution that seeing such a small train has become, again, a remarkable event. It might seem amusing to Mr. Richard Trevithick, who is credited with inventing a train in 1804 that could move nine metric tons of coal along a track (1), or to the Englishman George Stephenson, the first known owner of a public railroad, who used it to transport freight along the twenty-mile route from Stockton to Darlington in 1825 and to ferry passengers over the thirty-mile track from Liverpool to Manchester five years later (2). The crew on one of the first American steam locomotive runs, who lost their race on wooden rails in the year 1825 to a team of horses only because an engine belt broke (3), might also be astonished to know of our familiarity with "bullet trains", "light rail" and "a train with only three cars."

I have always liked trains. When I attempt to enjoy a peaceful morning on our rear sun-porch, I am sometimes mildly irritated by the constant din of the freeway traffic, to say nothing of the buzz of power lawnmowers in nearby yards, but the plaintive howl and powerful roar of the Amtrak, or even that of a much longer freight hauler, bothers me not at all. My personal experience with trains has been varied but always exciting. Our family

train trip to Florida some years ago proved to be one adventure after another; two of the highlights, which bear some relevance to Tootle, the main character in the "it tale" (4) we shall discuss shortly, stem from the unyielding but essential requirement that the train and its passengers stay on the track. Thus, when a fire hose was draped across the tracks in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania to pump up water from a river in the valley to fight a fire, no one was going anywhere until the hose could be removed when the fire was finally extinguished more than an hour later. Likewise, when a young man in St. Petersburg called in a bomb threat, the train was stopped in rural central Florida with no one allowed off until the situation was resolved two hours afterward, prompting much discussion among ourselves as to why we could not leave the train to avoid a potential explosion while the villagers outside watched with nervous amusement. Those who have never ridden a subway are missing experiences akin to those I have had which a bus normally does not provide--an exciting albeit routine progression underground at lightning speed while hearing the muffled roar and clickety-clack on the rails; an unobstructed half-hour ride from the concrete canyons of Manhattan's upper east side to the distant weekday solitude of the beach at Coney Island; to an aggressive assist from a short and elderly but vigorous, wiry man who helped pull us out of a jam-packed subway car at our stop in Rome during rush hour--a reminder that size is not a prerequisite for power. Two of my childhood experiences with trains are polar opposites. My very first train ride, from Milwaukee to Green Bay, necessitated by a snowstorm that made driving inadvisable for my father, consumed almost six hours, far longer than our family's summer automobile trips lasted, prompting a feeling of impatience. I had the opposite feeling, one of fright about the power and speed of an engine, when I tried to stop my model train from

racing around a track and could only do so when I quickly unplugged the cord for the train's transformer.

Trains, both the early steam engines and their diesel successors from the 1930's onwards (5), enabled the machines of the Industrial Revolution to be transported far and wide, radically changing people and the landscape. The work of hauling goods and people became vastly more efficient, permitting greater mobility but also intruding upon a formerly far more quiet rural landscape and eventually making nighttime travel possible for child as well as adult passengers. A book for children--*Sleepytime Train* (6)-- amuses but also advertises with a tale of a train that leaves families undisturbed while they ride through the night on the rails, enjoying a welcome meal as they arise in the morning.

Trains not only impacted the visible landscape, they impacted our psyche. With the ability to go farther faster, and to haul more as we did, peoples' ambitions and their familiarity with a world outside their immediate surroundings expanded. Most of the stories about train travel for children, and many for adults, see the train from the viewpoint of the engine or of the engineer or fireman, rather than the cars being pulled, much as tales of horses assume the vantage point of the rider or the horse. They thus serve as a powerful force for readers of such tales to identify with, wanting to go farther and faster, to perform work useful either to satisfy one's own urges for strength and power or to satisfy others' needs to have the work of hauling and transportation done. Our ability to identify with the locomotive is enhanced by the similarity of its front to a human face, as well as by our ability to see the wheels and to hear the whistle and the huffing and puffing that can inspire awe close up as we see the "iron horse" doing work that we could never do. Trains thus invite comparisons to other beings that have greater

power and mobility than we do. Especially so for children. Their world is populated largely by people who are taller and more powerful and resourceful than they. They are experiencing rapid changes in their size and strength, and becoming increasingly mobile, gaining access to the further reaches of their environment--home, backyard or playground, school, stores--as well as to an expanding network of relatives, friends, classmates and caregivers. Much of what has been said here about trains can also be said for other vehicles that are powered by steam engines to haul freight and passengers or do other useful work-- notably, watercraft and farm machinery. Many books for young children tell of adventures of tugboats and tractors, other witnesses to and participants in the Age of Steam and of Diesel.

One of the more memorable Little Golden Books I read as a young child was the story of Tootle (7). Authored by Gertrude Crampton with illustrations by Tibor Gergely, published in 1945 and now described on its cover as a “classic”, it is still in print--as of 2001, the third most widely purchased children’s hardcover book in history with 8.6 million sold (8), profiting from the widespread availability of Golden Books not only at bookstores but also at supermarkets, toy stores and other venues. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers the definition for the catchy title of the book as meaning “to drive or move along in a leisurely manner (9).” Tootle’s desire to do this forms the central issue of the story.

Tootle, touted as the most promising student among several youthful engines who aspire to become big locomotives someday, attends Lower Trainswitch School. He has worked hard at mastering the various tasks that this requires, such as Whistle Blowing, Coming Around Curves Safely and, importantly, stopping For a Red Flag Waving.

However, he has difficulty with the critical task of Staying on the Rails No Matter What. His sorties through the fields to sample the delights of nature such as butterflies and flowers, begun after he first left the tracks to test his mettle by racing a horse through the fields, and thereby to see whether he was fast enough to become a “fast flyer”, are eventually discovered by his teachers. This discovery prompts them, in concert with the village populace who are supportive of him personally but anxious because of his impending failure to graduate, to devise a strategy to interfere with his romping through the fields. They position themselves throughout the field he likes to play in and hold up red flags to warn him to get back on the tracks. Having learned that Stopping at Red Flags is all-important, and finding that there is such a profusion of them that he can no longer proceed, he thus obeys both internal dicta and external obstacles and returns to the track on his next escapade, deciding that “this is the place for me.” This enables him to become a famous Two-Miles-a-Minute Flyer on the route from New York to Chicago, as well as a coach who admonishes the young locomotives to “Stay On the Rails No Matter What”, an achieved identity which meets with the approval of his former teacher, although no mention is made of his peers’ reaction to his promotion and new responsibilities.

The color illustrations embedded in the text reinforce the character of Tootle as a free spirit, depicted as smiling broadly during his romps, in one instance winking at butterflies as he does, as well as showing his distress as he encounters a succession of the inhibiting red flags. They show the school as a place with a spatial arrangement akin to a machine shop or factory, with the several student locomotives watching the teacher’s lesson, much as they might do in a shop class at a traditional high school. Notwithstanding Bettelheim’s critique (10), about the unreality of all this-- that all of the villagers would

never unite as one in the effort to reform Tootle--they are depicted as doing so, having closed all their shops for the day.

The ideology which Tootle seems based upon--conformity and discipline, inevitably directing one away from spontaneous pleasures, as preconditions for success in a meritocratic society--as well as the gender bias apparent from the absence of female characters--has been described thoroughly and consistently, albeit not frequently, in the scholarly literature. Burbules (11) and Johnsey (12) each approach their critique from what they describe as a Marxist viewpoint, which is very sensitive to the injustice of social stratification and the straightjacketing influence of capitalist institutions, also acknowledging that the values implicit in the story transcend any benevolent intention the writer of the text may have had. Although some of the general principles of Marxist criticism, such as a need to be sensitive to the origin of the elements in artistic works rather than taking them for granted and treating artistic productions purely as entertainment, may well have wide acceptance in the scholarly community, the more narrow political and economic viewpoint they bring to literary criticism seems to ignore the fact that bureaucracies of whatever political stripe, even educational institutions, are stratified and educate and employ far more soldiers than generals. Bettellheim's critique (13) sees no initiative or freedom in Tootle, preferring to ignore the success Tootle had which did indeed depend on his initiative. He also appears to exaggerate the extent of Tootle's repudiation of his interest in his appreciation of beauty or his experience of freedom in the meadow; the text, which does not appear to have been revised, indicates that Tootle says, when facing all the red flags, that he wondered how he could ever have thought the meadow was such a good place to be, but this is in the context of the relentless

waving of red flags that essentially forced him back on the track. Bettelheim cites David Riesman (14) as saying that Tootle's education befits an other-directed society. The latter comment may well be appropriate but nevertheless may actually be implicitly laudatory for a society that, after all, does require a substantial degree of conformity, especially for a character who is structurally bound to certain constraints, such as, literally, staying on the track. Ms. Crampton may have made *Tootle* vulnerable to ideological criticism by providing a very straightforward tale with very clear-cut values, which it is easy to criticize forty or more years of the work's authorship. The values implicit in *Tootle* were very likely consonant with the values prevailing in American society in the immediate post-World War II era, the age of "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" (15). The Tootle story does not mention what the reaction of Tootle's peers was to his success; although this may be a shortcoming and again invites ideologically based criticism--that the story lauds conformity to the expectations of those in control of a society, ignoring potential competing needs of lower societal strata--children's stories do not characteristically describe peer reactions to the hero figure. Although they not infrequently do so, they could indeed be faulted if they did so in a simplistic, excessively optimistic way, given the competition for success and adult approval that is an inevitable part of the struggle to succeed and mature. That said, Tootle does not acknowledge his debt to the townspeople, who prevented him from leaving the tracks, in which case he would not have received his promotion. A revised tale of Tootle, whatever mention it made of Tootle's peers, might have acknowledged this debt, perhaps with a slight plot twist such as "Now every time Tootle makes his run from New York to Chicago he gives a 'toot' to let the villagers know how grateful he is for their help", or some such acknowledgement. As for the critique that

Tootle's spontaneity and creativity were constrained by the need to stay on the tracks, one wonders what would have been the critical reaction to an alternative version of this tale if it implied, without identifying itself as a fantasy and therefore suspending belief in the reality of its plot, that a train could ignore obvious intrinsic limits and frolic in a meadow, yet succeed in his mission, to say nothing of the embarrassment or frustration the adult reader would experience in trying to make such a tale credible to a child.

The story of Tootle resonates with the values and lifestyle of my family in important ways. They were loving and supportive but nevertheless strict, placing a high value on education and seeming to view success as a child and adult as involving not only resourcefulness but also conformity to authority to a substantial degree. This reflects the immediate community of our neighborhood and parish church, in which parents and other authority figures, much like those in *Tootle*, valued a mix of conformity, duty, and achievement.

The author of *Tootle* also produced two other children's books, each of which is a tale in which the central character accepts a lesser identity than what he aspired to, in contrast to *Tootle*, for whom conformity to limits, albeit externally imposed ones, led to success. Her tale of *Scuffy the Tugboat* (16)--another bestseller of all time (17)--tells how Scuffy, a bathtub toy who aspires to become a real tugboat, is taken to a brook by a friendly man and his son, but gradually drifts into increasingly larger and more dangerous waters, and is rescued just before being swept into the ocean by this man, who saves him by placing him back in the tub, a fate which Scuffy willingly accepts. Another of her tales -- one which ends with far less success for the protagonist than is true for the others, is that

of *The Large and Growly Bear* (18), who goes around trying to scare people but ends up scaring himself when he looks in a pond while he is trying to scare the fish who live in it.

The difference between the fate of Tootle and of Scuffy the Tugboat raises questions about what it takes for these representations of children, and for children themselves, to succeed and grow up. Some of the tales in which they attempt to do so resemble the heroic struggles through inner doubt and external dangers and challenges (19) seen in fables or fairy tales in some respects. Some are less ambitious and chart a more modest developmental trajectory. We can compare Tootle to several other tales as we view them through the lens of development as a child, through childhood to successful and satisfying adulthood, and beyond this to the role of heroism in growing up.

Some of the tales one finds among the motorized “it tales” (20) involve acceptance of a muted identity that results from one’s limited skills or adaptability, not through pathology or evil--there do not seem to be any such among the “it tales”--but through limitations inherent in their structure. Thus, *The Little Red Lighthouse* (21) tells of a lighthouse which prides itself on flashing its beacon over the Hudson River until one day the George Washington Bridge is built and it feels overshadowed and defeated-- self-doubting sentiments that dissipate when it discovers that its beacon is needed to prevent ships from colliding with the bridge. A similar tale--*The Little Red Caboose* (22)--tells of a caboose which is jealous of the steam engine positioned at the front of the train because it gets all the glory, until it discovers that it is needed to prevent the train from sliding down a mountain. The tale of *Stubby the Tractor* (23) tells of a steam-powered tractor that becomes dispirited and cannot be consoled by those who are expert with machines, but can be successfully encouraged by well-meaning neighbors with big hearts, after he has

waited for his animal friends to resettle themselves safely so the plowing will not hurt them or damage their homes. *Someplace for Sparky* (24) tells of a little steam engine who is discouraged because he feels he is no longer needed since steam travel has become outmoded, having been replaced by diesel power. After various trials and tribulations he motors his way to the end of the train line which, he is surprised to discover, is located at a park where he becomes the train to ferry families around so they can enjoy the park in comfort, a new identity which brings him much satisfaction. In such tales, the ingredients of success seem to include encouragement, sometimes by supportive others, to continue on, despite initial discouragement, and acceptance of a limited but nevertheless useful role in society.

Some of the steam-engine tales, whether about trains or tugboats, chart a more ambitious path, with both external and internal struggles for the hero-figure along the way. For Tootle the struggle is primarily internal--he needs to overcome his own flightiness and focus himself on what is needed to avoid the danger implicit in leaving the tracks--a danger which is never explicated in the text or illustrations even in his facial expressions--as well as to achieve his primary goal of demonstrating speed and thereby maturity, and secondarily that of favorably impressing others. A somewhat similar redemptive and only implicitly cautionary tale--*Little Toot* (25)--tells of a mischievous tugboat who defies his father by his irresponsible playful excesses and is therefore scorned and ignored by the larger ships in the harbor, but eventually rescues a struggling ship which he comes upon when he is playing outside the harbor, thereby gaining the respect of the larger ships and restoring himself to his father's good graces. *Tuffy the Tugboat* (26) is a somewhat similar tale, although in Tuffy the hero character begins as a

dutiful tugboat, with no need for redemption but with a limited role, who also rescues a large ship after he ignores the sincere, earnest warnings from several of the larger ships about the dangers involved, thereby demonstrating not only his courage and altruism but also his strength.

Thomas the Tank Engine (27), a wildly popular character first developed by a minister (the Reverend Audry) to entertain his young son while convalescing from an illness, undergoes many trials in the various stories in which he and his companion steam engines are featured as they work at developing the skills they need to succeed as adult locomotives. For one of the engines, this involves an heroic effort and show of strength, which is rewarded with an assignment to a branch line of his own. If Thomas and his companions were live children or adults, they might well be delighted with the renown and commercial success the product line of his namesake has achieved, as can be seen in even a brief visit to Toys-R-Us or to my grandson's bedroom. Indeed, many children are introduced to the stories of Thomas the Tank Engine and other such storybook characters through exposure to their derivative products and can play with them in a fantasized way of their choosing, in miniature but nevertheless in real life (28).

A very well-known steam-engine tale--*The Little (Blue) Engine That Could* (29)--also tells of a steam engine that does not need to seek redemption, as did Tuffy, but must overcome her ("it" in the original 1906 version) (30) internal challenge of self-doubt, which is made more difficult by the ridicule and rejection she experiences from adult male locomotives, bystanders who scoff at the heroic struggle in which she is engaged. As the story goes, a (female) locomotive is attempting to haul a trainful of presents to children but cannot successfully negotiate the hills and valleys on her torturous route. The Little

Blue Engine offers to help and, in a manner which has been compared to the Parable of the Good Samaritan (31), does so successfully after a great struggle, both against physical obstacles such as hills and mud and against her three detractors--adult male engines who believe that she was not up to the task and saw no need or opportunity for them to come to her assistance.

The Little Blue Engine, a very popular story whose multiplicity of versions and conflicting accounts of its authorship give it a complex and controversial history (32), seems to be a somewhat feminist tale, one of very few that can be readily found among the "it tales." Neither the assumption of an authority role in the world of commerce and industry nor the achievement of one's identity through a display of strength has usually been the province of female heroines in children's literature. Although to some extent this is consistent with the mythology that prevailed even as late as immediate postwar England and America, it is disappointing to see how few of the characters in the "it tales" are female. This is particularly so when one recalls the widespread adulation of "Rosie the Riveter" and hundreds of thousands of similar women that enabled us to continue to run America's factories during World War II.

The struggle against internal flaws--whether impulsiveness, selfishness, inattentiveness to danger or self-doubt--resembles that seen in the many young children's texts depicting human or human-like animal characters of similar ilk. These would include characters such as Curious George (33), a benevolent but mischievous character who engages in benevolent mischief through his various excesses, such as ignoring the lesson the boys and girls are learning at the library, trying to take out too many books, resulting in his crashing the book cart and, after being helped by the children to reshelve some of

the scattered books, reading only the books that really are for him. He thereby accepts an identity more limited, yet more sustainable, than his inordinate appetites led him to aspire to. Another of my childhood favorites--*The Littlest Angel* (34)--tells of a clumsy, forgetful and occasionally slightly mischievous four-year-old angel (coincidentally, exactly my age when given this book by my parents as a Christmas gift one year after its publication) who feels that his very ordinary gifts are not acceptable to the Almighty but then discovers otherwise. His errant behavior riles the heavenly choir and he therefore despairs of his gifts--the boyhood detritus of his life on earth--being acceptable to the Almighty for the occasion of Christ's birth. He finds that the Almighty values these most highly of all, thereby achieving an inner feeling of acceptance and redemption. The story ends as he sees his special star--unknown to the other angels (his peers), visible to humans but its significance known only to him--rise above the birthplace of Jesus. As with *Tootle*, there is no mention of peer acceptance. The story of Pinocchio (34), who begins his existence as a puppet but achieves a transformed identity as a "real boy", is one of the better-known tales of objects that engage in battles of heroic proportions and thereby overcome obstacles, some of which were of their own making, to grow up.

The self-doubt of the heroic character may well be an essential ingredient for children to identify with that character in these tales, and indeed it does seem to mirror their own experience. The need to overcome both internal weakness--whether self-doubt alone or additional self-defeating sentiments and traits as well, and external obstacles--requiring a display of strength as well as durability, features prominently in these stories. This is especially so since the tales involve--as a vehicle for the child's emotional identification--machines, which are useful only to the extent that they are stronger and

more powerful than we humans are, and that therefore have rather severe limits on the pathways they can use to achieve a satisfying and useful identity. Those among such characters whose path of growth goes beyond the usual and transcends it through meeting challenges--especially heroically by overcoming self-doubt and facing down danger--notably Tuffy, Little Toot and the Little Blue Engine--are not depicted as being motivated simply by a desire to demonstrate their prowess as growing children or burgeoning adult figures. Rather, those characters who accomplish heroic feats are depicted as taking substantial risks to life or limb after they are motivated by a desire, or acceptance of a call, to serve or help others, as are many of the hero figures in the more complex fairy tales familiar to older readers.

In all of these tales the adult figures become accepting of the achieved identity of the successful hero character, although in many of them the peer group does not offer such acceptance or disappears from view, lending some credence to the critique that some of these tales seem to promote the conditional success of a stratified autocratic society, rather than the wider sharing of the benefits of the combined labor of all members in a more egalitarian one. However, many of the more elaborate fairy tales do not end in explicit peer acceptance or recognition either, so this may simply reflect values implicit in much of the fantasy literature for young children, regardless of the kind of hero or of the different challenges he or she encounters.

These stories, many of them set in an earlier time, evoke nostalgia not only for the time in their own childhood when the adult reader enjoyed them, but for an idealized bygone era that, perhaps only in retrospect, seems to have been simpler and happier (35). The ideologically based critiques that appear to be quite sensitive to social and economic

issues such as societal stratification, as well as those who also or alternatively criticize cautionary tales such as *Tootle* for espousing an authoritarian, top-down approach to education rather than one that is exploratory and learner-initiated, also seem to be romanticizing childhood as a time when children should be able postpone the sacrifices necessary to acquire skills which they will indeed require during middle and later childhood or even earlier. These critics also seem to ignore how much one must usually sacrifice spontaneous pleasure and openness to nature in order to pursue a professional career. Simply put, there are some kinds of homework which are hard to do in a meadow. Also, like all of us, different children prefer different activities and thus develop and get rewarded for them differently; a child of a quiet disposition must sometimes struggle to keep up with children who are developing motoric or social skills, who are perhaps proceeding along a “track” that is every bit as confining as that offered by the prevailing educational or vocational authority figures. Although literary criticism, whether ideological or not, and regardless of genre, understandably confines itself primarily to individual texts, authors or historical periods, if one is considering the impact of a text on the audience, and not merely its intrinsic characteristics, one needs to investigate this impact empirically, as well as considering the variety of texts which the child is exposed to and which among these they prefer and understand. All the more so since no one text, no matter what its ideological merit, can be totally effective both in entertaining children and in carrying the critics’ preferred ideological message.

Clearly, the audience for these tales is that of young, usually preschool children. However, the values they espouse do seem to resonate with adults in the Industrial Age, who largely accept the benefits of this age, although they may well identify with, give lip

service to or temporarily and conditionally embrace a more natural way of life, decrying our excessive reliance on machines. A starkly contrasting, rather dark and stark view of the Machine Age-- short stories or plays for adults highlighting and sometimes satirizing the various shortcomings or deleterious effects of machines and our reliance on them--is offered by the Jungian critic Bettina Knapp (37). She reviews several such stories, written from the 1920's onward, which, in turn, see machines as a model some people seem to use to keep their emotional involvement with others to a minimum (38); a resource people have come to rely upon excessively and which can embarrass them by yielding disappointing results when the prospective passengers at a train station discover that, although there is a railway infrastructure, there is no train so it will never arrive (39); or a mechanism that can take on demonic qualities and go out of control, suggesting the eruption of repressed unconscious urges, threatening us all (40). This darker view of the machine age has also been dramatized in film, even more so since computers have become woven into our lives in an ever-increasing profusion of ways, with the issue of our very reality being challenged by such movies as *The Matrix* (41).

The expanding interest of the field of children's literature appears to be bringing in critical approaches akin to those used in the analysis of adult literature in a process which will very likely continue (42). The analysis of *Tootle* and similar artificially animated characters, as an exemplar of the supermarket literature published as Little Golden Books, has been sparse but may become as sophisticated and elaborate as that used to analyze more complex fairy tales, which have already been studied extensively in regards to their explicit and implicit messages, historical antecedents and adherence to cultural templates (43, 44, 45). Yet this can hardly diminish, for a child or for the adult reader, the value of

these tales as occasions for playful socializing, for entertaining and for easing youngsters into dreamland. For most of us, much of the time, they are and will be “just stories.” Indeed, they seem to have stood the test of time better than some of the ideologies that have been invoked to critique them.

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