

# Hans Christian Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier": Variations upon Silence and Love

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Never seek to tell thy love  
Love that never told can be  
For the gentle wind does move  
Silently invisibly.

William Blake, Notebook (c. 1789)

The one-legged tin soldier begins from molten tin cast from a kitchen spoon, and after a brief sojourn in the human world, he falls—or is pushed—from an upstairs window, flows down a tempestuous river and enters the abyss, where he is lifted up and returns to the same room, completing the circle by melting again in a fiery conflagration. His journey enters each of the archetypal elements: earth, air, water, fire, ether. Truly he is a much-travelled soldier, unlike his twenty-four brothers who stay in one place, safely in their box. What does this "little traveller"<sup>1</sup> tell us?

Hans Christian Andersen's "*Den standhaftige Tinsoldat*" ["The Steadfast Tin Soldier"] was ostensibly written for children, included in the 1838 second edition of his famous *Eventyr, fortalte for Born* [*Tales, told for Children*]. Indeed it is still generally regarded as a child's story, though along with other Andersen tales it has been objected to by moralistic librarians and over-anxious parents as being too pessimistic.<sup>2</sup> A story in which the hero and heroine burn to death at the end is not exactly a conventional happy ending. Recently in Europe and Russia, however, Andersen has been taken seriously by academics, as evidenced by university curricula and international conferences, and he himself always asserted that his tales were intended for both children and adults.<sup>3</sup> He virtually created, single-handed, the literary folktale, in contrast to his near contemporaries, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, who based their seminal *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* (1812-1815) on oral, anonymous narratives collected from German peasants. This genre has proved to be enormously influential upon the future development of English literature, despite being filtered through spurious Victorian translations and misreadings,<sup>4</sup> influencing a wide variety of writers. The list is endless: Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, L. Frank Baum, Beatrix Potter, Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, A. A. Milne, Roald Dahl, Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, Angela Carter, Russell Hoban (whose *The Mouse and His Child* is explicitly modeled

on "The Steadfast Tin Soldier"), and even J. K. Rowling's smash-hit Harry Potter series—these and many more owe an incalculable debt to Andersen. Yet despite this huge intertextual connection, in the English cultural imagination and canon Andersen still belongs to the nursery, so long as his stories are suitably altered beforehand. As Diana Crone Frank and Jeffrey Frank note in their recent sparkling translation of selected Andersen tales, which for the first time catches the natural colloquial authenticity of his voice: "two hundred years after Andersen's birth a sort of literary entropy persists" (2).

"The Steadfast Tin Soldier" is arguably one of the purest examples of the literary wonder tale, a masterpiece in miniature. Moreover, it is seminal in Andersen's oeuvre, as Jackie Wullschlager in her recent biography points out: "It is the first tale he wrote which has neither a folk tale source nor a literary model, but comes straight out of his imagination, and it signalled a new approach to fairy tales which changed the genre for all time" (185). Given its brilliant originality, signalling a floodtide of idiosyncratic works to come (about 170 altogether), it is all the more puzzling why any particular Andersen 'fairy tale' (an utter misnomer, since fairies seldom occur) is rarely given the same kind of rigorous critical attention we apply—or inflict—upon any other acknowledgedly great author. Inevitably, the usual format of Andersen analysis, even in Europe, is biographical, 'new historicism' excavating topical details of his original life and times to annotate his texts accordingly. Whilst this research contributes invaluablely to elucidating specific nuances, its flip-side is a proliferation of the 'Andersen myth' (Ugly Duckling slum kid from Odense goes to Copenhagen and makes good), which ultimately is reductive.

I have known "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" from childhood, and even now alternate back and forth between two basic readings. The first is straight: a poignant love story of lyrical simplicity, in its modest way up there in the pantheon of Psyche and Eros, Tristan and Iseult, Orihime and Hikoboshi. Though the tin soldier refuses to shed tears to the bitter end, many a reader has done so, for it ignites a gratitude for all the various inflections of love—including that most painful of all, unfulfilled—one may have experienced in one's life, no matter how impoverished. The second way of responding to the story is ironic and ambiguous: gradually becoming aware of a subtext which undermines what the surface narrative seems to be asserting and opens a complex range of doubts which severely critique the prior reading as illusory. In fact, these two modes are deliberately embedded in the text by Andersen, who "was the first to perceive the possibilities of a double articulation for children and adults" (Wullschlager 158). One could loosely term this dual perspective Blake's innocence and experience, the romantic and the realistic, the traditional and modernist, though multiple layers of meaning oscillate so quickly within any individual reader (irregardless of chronological age) that we may hardly be aware that they occur, and Andersen seems to present both as simultaneous and equally legitimate ways of perceiving, feeling and reading.

The story begins:

There were once twenty-five tin soldiers, all of them brothers, for they had all been made from the same tin kitchen spoon. They shouldered arms and looked straight before them, very smart in their red and blue uniforms. ‘Tin soldiers!’ That was the very first thing that they heard in this world, when the lid of their box was taken off. A little boy had shouted this and clapped his hands; he had been given them as a birthday present, and now he set them out on the table. Each soldier was exactly like the next—except for one, which had only a single leg; he was the last to be molded, and there was not quite enough tin left. Yet he stood just as well on his one leg as the others did on their two, and he is this story’s hero. (70)

Even in this first paragraph, alternative readings set into play the dynamic of the entire text. The tin soldiers seem the epitome of heroism and military valour, “very smart” in their resplendent uniforms, validated with applause by the child who receives them. Their uniformity constitutes their strength: they act as a single unit, clones of each other, “look[ing] straight before them.” Yet at the same time, they are all fashioned from “the same tin kitchen spoon,” sharing a mundane proletarian origin. The only character who recognizes this incongruity is the one-legged soldier, who should be excluded from the perfection of his regiment, yet is anointed as “this story’s hero.”

The most important characteristic of the tin soldier is that he remains resolutely “steadfast.” Various translations from the Danish *standhaftige* (with connotations of “morally upright”) as *dauntless*, *constant*, or *staunch*, the word literally signifies *standing firm* (old English, *stedefast*): to stand securely in one place, rooted, which is what a soldier does on official guard duty and as training for actual battle. It is not so much that the tin soldier journeys in this story, for in fact he does not physiologically move a single centimeter (with one exception, to be considered later), as that he is *journeyed*, carried by other forces, violent or indeed demonic: a goblin, the wind, rude street-children’s hands, the relentless rain, rushing water, a ravenous fish. He is able to enter and pass inviolate through this fluctuating world precisely because he himself remains passive, the opposite of the action hero prevalent in Western literature since the Greek epics.

As post-Walt Disney readers, we are so used to animated toys in books, film and computer graphics, we forget that Andersen was one of the very first writers to bestow life to inanimate objects. Lois Rostow Kuznets, in her excellent study of the role of toys in Western literature, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development*, observes:

Hans Christian Andersen’s tales bristle with a consciousness of secret lives that remain hidden from human beings not only in objects modeled on human beings, like tin soldiers and China shepherdesses, but in shirt collars, teapots, scraps of pigskin, tops, and balls. Getting to know the full range of Andersen’s tales is to plunge oneself into a near-schizophrenic awareness of multiple tiny voices competing for attention—animism run riot, but lacking pagan divinity. (80)

One obvious advantage of having a toy as a protagonist is that it permits Anderson to play both sides of the naturalistic fence. From an adult perspective, of course the tin soldier cannot speak, any more than other toys unless they have mechanical voices built into them. Toys are toys, humans are humans: a rigid distinction separates them. But from the tin soldier's own perspective, reflecting his interface with the child who plays timeless hours with him, of course he *can* speak, though understandably he may shut up when adults are around. The assumption within the animistic framework of the 'fairytale' that Andersen constructs is that *everything has a voice*. Given this "near-schizophrenic awareness of multiple tiny voices competing for attention," it is ironic that the protagonist is mute. Rather, the tin soldier's voice exists at the far end of a harmonic spectrum where we hear only his interior monologue filtering down to us, but no sound. The central contradiction around which his tiny existence revolves is that he is simultaneously a disposable toy *and* a human consciousness which can feel and do everything except move—which includes moving his own tongue. To be steadfast means to keep his unspoken vow of silence.

This is not to say that the tin soldier does not struggle against the dichotomies infused within him by the tinsmith.<sup>5</sup> From a negative perspective, it could be argued that he exists imprisoned within his professional uniform, that 'character armor' which Jung calls the persona. His paralysis includes an inability or extreme reluctance to make any decision whatsoever, exacerbated by what is probably a pathological shyness toward women in general.<sup>6</sup> His code is rigidly formal and disciplined. *Never reveal what you truly feel. Above all (if you are a man), never let go of your weapon.* As such, he is a paradigm of early-nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe: stuffed into a straitjacket of provincialism, with its values prescribing "humility, moderation, asceticism, decorum, economy of mind and soul, devotion to God, loyalty to Denmark" (Zipes 74-75)<sup>7</sup>—and, one might add, sexual repression. Though his outsider status defines him as different from his brothers, the price he pays for being at the extreme outer edge, with its clarity of vision, is that he is locked into absolutism..

At the same time, these strict parameters permit him an extraordinary freedom: to stand "at attention," which means to exist with acute sensory awareness, alert as a wild animal, guarding against potential enemies. Even the slightest movement registers upon this rapt vigilance. His vision and sense of hearing are so keen because they originate from a stationary position, like a telescope peering into deep space. He is able to see clearly because he does not obtrude with words or arbitrary action. The tin soldier embodies a radical epistemological stance, his iconic posture akin to that of a Rinzai Zen monk during *zazen* (sitting meditation), when it is forbidden to move a muscle. It is his duty to maintain both close focus and peripheral vision, which is why his eyes move elliptically across the room until they touch a paper castle—where they abruptly stop.

Through its little windows you could see right into the rooms. In front of it, tiny trees were arranged round a piece of mirror, which was meant to look like a lake. Swans made of wax seemed to float on its surface, and gaze at their white

reflections. The whole scene was enchanting—and the prettiest thing of all was a girl who stood in the open doorway; she too was cut out of paper, but her gauzy skirt was of finest muslin; a narrow blue ribbon crossed her shoulder like a scarf, and was held by a shining sequin almost the size of her face. (71)

Love at first sight. But what is disquieting about this initial recognition is that more narrative space is spent on describing the opulent setting in which the paper ballerina lives, and her expensive clothing, than on she herself (whoever she may be). The tin soldier is obviously deeply impressed with the “enchanting” quality of the castle, its rooms open to gaze, its impeccable landscaping, the vast amount of money and power it embodies. Yet at the same time, the narrative voice mocks it: everything is fake—the castle is actually cardboard, the lake is a mirror, the swans are wax, and the ballerina in the front of the “open doorway”—signifying a kind of gatekeeper whom one must confront with the correct response in order to enter the majestic castle—is made of one-dimensional paper. What is underscored is how the object of desire mingles with her socioeconomic status. She is an aristocratic extension of the castle, utterly out of reach for a one-legged tin soldier living in a box, and newly arrived at that.

At the first brush of eyes with the ballerina, a magnetic field exists between them stronger than any language. Their silence pulsates like an aurora borealis, a recognition of shared sensibility. But from the beginning, his sense of an intuitive kinship is predicated upon a false assumption: that she is disabled like himself.

This charming little creature held both of her arms stretched out, for she was a dancer; indeed, one of her legs was raised so high in the air that the tin soldier could not see it at all; he thought that she had only one leg like himself. (71)<sup>8</sup>

How it is possible to be a ballerina with one leg does not bother the tin soldier any more than consideration of how it is possible to be a soldier with only one leg: he knows he is as good as or even better than his twenty-four brothers, and it follows that the ballerina must be the most splendid dancer in the world *because* of her ‘handicap.’ Andersen’s insight here was ahead of his time: many people who excel at a particular skill develop their ability as compensation for a corresponding lack or congenital disability. The story can in fact be read as a sympathetic and realistic account of a disabled person, or what we now term ‘physically challenged.’ One of the ironies behind the text is that a crippled soldier is the inevitable result of a war. But no war has yet occurred, and ordinary recruitment policy would prohibit one-legged men from enlisting. The outsider status of the tin soldier is based on this physical impairment, for he generates anxiety to everyone he meets, who are reminded that soldiers come back from the glorious war with parts of their bodies missing.<sup>9</sup>

The paper ballerina quickly becomes the major focus of the soldier’s perceptual/ emotional field. From the beginning, he accepts it as a given fact that any actual relationship with her would be clearly impossible, although he admits indulging in the fantasy of marriage. The gulf that separates them is as wide a social difference as that of any of the tragic ballads:

‘Now she would be just the right wife for me,’ he thought. ‘But she is so grand; she

lives in a castle, and I have only a box—and there are five-and-twenty of us in that! There certainly isn't room for her. Still, I can try to make her acquaintance.' (71)<sup>10</sup>

Though he cannot touch her in her remote castle on top of the paper-mache hill, he can hold her "steadfast" in his mind. She becomes a centre of gravity, a polarity which defines and yet threatens his own stability. The soldier's entire being is suffused with awareness of her presence, though she exists physically apart and there seems to be no possibility of any 'real-life' relationship.

At this point, the soldier does something extraordinary—he actually moves his body:

So he lay down full-length behind a snuff-box which was on the table; from there he could easily watch the little paper dancer, who continued to stand on one leg without losing her balance. (71)

This is the only occasion in the entire narrative that the protagonist moves of his own volition. We could take it as an inconsistency in either the text or (more likely) the translation, for at the end of the next paragraph he is described as standing, though no mention is made of shifting position. But if indeed the detail is accurate, it opens up several interpretative possibilities. To lie down with the ballerina at his side is almost certainly the tin soldier's unspeakable heart's desire. But he hides behind the snuff-box, where he can safely maintain eye contact while his own body is shielded.<sup>11</sup> This links to the centrality of the role of the goblin who lives within that snuff-box and is (jealously?) aware that the soldier has been obsessively gazing at the ballerina. By biographical extension, the tin soldier may be overwhelmed by a fit of dizziness and must lie down at the realization that he's met the woman of his dreams, as Andersen asserts happened to himself just before he proposed (by letter) to Riborg Voigt (Wullschlager 98-99). Finally, it is even possible that the soldier's failure to see the ballerina's other leg is based simply on his ignorance of the female body. We remember Andersen's famous little mermaid (in the story written one year earlier, Jan. 1837), homogeneously fish-tailed from the waist-down, who acquires human legs at the cost of constant pain and severing her tongue, ironically becoming physically nearer to her beloved yet unable to articulate her love. She too is a graceful dancer.

The text implies that men and women exist at opposite ends of a room. Only our eyes meet, at first. How can we possibly communicate, without falling into the programmed behavior of other toys who play their noisy, routinized, group-oriented games when the human world falls asleep, and become suddenly comatose at the stroke of midnight? The soldier's logic is compelling: If both of them have only one leg, then perhaps they may unite into an organic whole? Her arms are stretched outward, making him jump to the conclusion that she is reaching specifically toward him. But from her own point-of-view, she may simply be practising a fiendishly difficult technique which requires the counterbalance of her upper body—classical dancers during this period were trained to maintain a fixed rictus-smile and look out to the audience, engaging them. Has he simply been seduced by the artistic persona she radiates? Does he admire her because her stillness is more steadfast than his own, which is starting to crack under the strain of passion? Contradistinctively, his arms are twisted inward and

upward. Both are contortionists, locked into a single physical stance which crystallizes their respective milieux. He is frozen by his military code; she, by her aristocratic and esthetic one.<sup>12</sup> She, like him, remains perfectly still, withholding herself from the frenetic activity of society around her:

When evening came, all the other tin soldiers were put in their box, and the children went to bed. Now the toys began to have games of their own; they played at visiting, and schools, and battles, and going to parties. The tin soldiers rattled in their box, for they wanted to join in, but they couldn't get the lid off. The nutcrackers turned somersaults, and the slate pencil squeaked on the slate; there was such a din that the canary woke up and took part in the talk—what's more, he did it in verse. The only two who didn't move were the tin soldier and the little dancer; she continued to stand on the point of her toe, with her arms held out; he stood just as steadily on his single leg—and never once did he take his eyes from her. (71)

It's noteworthy that the tin soldier's brothers desperately try to escape the confines of their box, their insular constraints. Theirs is a collective entity; his is individual, an outside by definition, obvious to anyone who so much as looks at him.

From the beginning, a preternatural stillness draws the tin soldier and the paper ballerina together. Why are they poised in a frozen tableau? The text implies it is because each of them is different from all the other toys in the room, and the laser beam purity of their interfused gaze is so intense that it stops time and motion. The other toys pretend to be human ("they played at visiting, and schools, and battles, and going to parties"); the tin soldier and the ballerina, paradoxically, are more authentic because they do not attempt to be human.

At this point, the black goblin makes his appearance, the villain in Andersen's tale.<sup>13</sup> He is the hidden malevolent presence that suddenly manifests itself (in the shape of a question mark) at midnight, the witching hour, the end of one cycle and the beginning of another—then hides again and lurks beneath the surface of a snuff-box which contains no snuff, critical and insidious. He condemns the soldier's right to exist separate from his brothers or even to look at the ballerina:

Now the clock struck twelve. Crack!—the lid flew off the snuff-box and up popped a little black goblin. There was no snuff inside the box—it was a kind of trick, a jack-in the box.

‘Tin soldier!’ screeched the goblin. ‘Keep your eyes to yourself!’

But the tin soldier pretended not to hear.

‘All right, just you wait till tomorrow!’ said the goblin. (71-72)

In this passage we encounter the first of four specific rationales that the tin soldier gives for his silence. Uncertain at how to verbally respond to such an unprovoked attack, and no doubt startled that his covert act of lying down and fantasizing about a woman he is supposed to be guarding is suddenly exposed, he pretends that he doesn't hear. The assumption 'I can speak, but I choose not to' is maintained. Predictably, this only makes the goblin more furious.

The goblin seeks to monitor and control even the senses of another being—and potentially of all the other toys. Allegorically, he is one of Andersen's prophetic representations of a totalitarian state such as Nazi Germany, Maoist China, Stalin's Russia, all the horrors of our twentieth century. On a more generalized level, he exemplifies the acculturation process whereby any society locks individuals into circumscribed modes of behavior which are destructive to our true potential.

But to look is free. One glance between the tin soldier and the ballerina is enough to establish a vital rapport, albeit unsupported by any experiential evidence. This connection is critical, for it sets into action a sequence of events that are irrevocable: because he looks at her and fantasizes about marriage, he lies down behind the snuff-box to watch her that night, and so is not put into the box with his other brothers, and so is placed on the window sill the next morning, and so, for the first time in his life, is knocked off balance, and falls—headfirst, as we are born.

When morning came and the children were up again, the tin soldier was placed on the window ledge. The goblin may have been responsible, or perhaps a draught blowing through—anyhow, the window suddenly swung open, and out fell the tin soldier, all the three storeys to the ground. It was a dreadful fall! His leg pointed upwards, his head was down, and he came to a halt with his bayonet stuck between the paving stones. (72)

In short, *she* is the cause of his fall. To look at someone with desire is to open oneself to the possibility of destroying the status quo and propelling one into the unknown where everything is put at risk. The alternative reader peering over one's shoulder, however, might suggest that the tin soldier deliberately *jumps* out of the window in order to escape an in-the-flesh meeting. Could it be that he prefers her to remain safely in her castle as an abstract entity, an untouchable figure whom he loved from afar (past tense, fitting neatly into a story one can write about later at one's leisure), but who alas either rejected him forthright or submitted to social/parental pressure? Andersen is on record for fleeing Copenhagen because his equilibrium was violently disturbed by the Swedish singer, Jenny Lind, with whom he had fallen in love.

The tin soldier's code of steadfastness continues to hold:

The servant-girl and the little boy went to search in the street, but although they were almost treading on the soldier they somehow failed to see him. If he had called out, "Here I am!" they would have found him easily, but he didn't think it proper behaviour to cry out when he was in uniform. (72)

Here, he advances a second reason for his continued silence: adherence to military duty, even in a crisis situation, despite the fact that if he had called he would have been rescued. His reliance upon propriety when wearing his professional uniform seems dubious. After all, the servant-girl and the boy to whom he has been given as a present are not enemies. Is it really contrary to the military code to ask civilians for help? Perhaps the real reason for his silence is



that he is incapable of saying, "Here I am!," an explicit statement of self-affirmation which is quite impossible at the moment? Perhaps he doesn't want to be found, in fact prefers to be cast in the role of the unrequited lover, as the biographical record would suggest?

He lies in the pouring rain, calmly feeling it stroke his tin body. His position is disorientating—bayonet caught between the cobblestones, a black joke, for what kind of soldier can he be with his weapon indisposed, upside-down, his one leg pointing absurdly upward?<sup>14</sup>—yet his basic equanimity remains undisturbed. This is what he does best: wait. Whether it be rain, an exquisite ballerina's glance, the jaws of a fish, or devastating fire, his reaction remains the same: acceptance, looking calmly at whatever may be in front of him.

Action again pulls him from stasis back into the human world. Two boys find the soldier, mock his authenticity, and set him adrift in a boat made from a newspaper.<sup>15</sup> They treat him only as an inanimate toy, not truly 'human,' in an analogous way to how ethnic minorities and the physically impaired are marginalized in any society:

Now it began to rain; the drops fell fast –it was a drenching shower. When it was over, a pair of urchins passed. 'Look!' said one of them. 'There's a tin soldier. Let's put him out to sea.'

So they made a boat out of newspaper and put the tin soldier in the middle, and set it in the fast-flowing gutter at the edge of the street. Away he sped, and the two boys ran beside him clapping their hands. The paper boat tossed up and down, sometimes whirling round and round, until the soldier felt quite giddy. But he remained as steadfast as ever, not moving a muscle, still looking straight in front of him, still shouldering arms. (72)

The tin soldier rushes down the gutter, which plunges through a culvert into a tunnel beneath the pavement. It would be harder to sink lower: "gutter" has long signified moral and physical degradation, and the sewer carries the detritus of the city.<sup>16</sup> This is the polar opposite of the warm, comfortable bourgeois room he has just been expelled from—truly he has been stationed to the front lines of combat; but like all warfare, especially in the modern era, the actual experience turns out quite sordid.

Oh, it was dark, quite as dark as it was in the box at home. 'Wherever am I going now?' the tin soldier wondered. 'Yes, it must be the goblin's doing. Ah! If only that young lady were here with me in the boat, I wouldn't care if it were twice as dark.' (72-73)

But if she were with him, would his reaction be any different? Would he speak to her, or move closer perhaps to touch her, which means letting go of his rifle? The stark fact which he now confronts is that *he cannot experience love in the form within which he presently exists. He must change his shape* if he is to venture any closer to her; transmute into another element. They are too different: tin and paper.

Another opportunity for speech now presents itself in the form of a manic water rat obsessed with tolls and passports:

Suddenly, from its home in the tunnel, out rushed a large water-rat. 'Have you got a passport?' it demanded. 'No entry without a passport!'

But the tin soldier said never a word; he only gripped his musket more tightly than ever. The boat rushed onwards, and behind it rushed the rat in fast pursuit. Ugh! How it ground its teeth, and yelled to the sticks and straws, 'Stop him! Stop him! He hasn't paid his toll! He hasn't shown his passport!' (73)<sup>17</sup>

Even in Hell, it seems, you need a passport. Humour such as the above gently hovers throughout Andersen's oeuvre. The soldier's silence in this third instance seems common sense: he does *not* have a passport, and to indulge in conversation with the bureaucratic water-rat would degenerate into a farcical war of words.<sup>18</sup> But the appearance of the rat signifies that he is crossing the border into a foreign country filled with unknown dangers. He exists now in a liminal state, as described by Carolyn G. Heilbrun: "The word 'limen' means 'threshold,' and to be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another" (3).

The drainpipe narrows, inexorably. Though Andersen does not mention it, the air must smell foul. The text suddenly fills with the piercing, nasty, empirical details of what adult readers may recognize as the process of dying. The "roaring noise" (74) is simultaneously his own bloodstream carrying him away into oblivion. No passport—no identity—no national boundaries—sweeping through them and through the fragile tissue of life itself, wholly free and helpless. This is the near-death experience that has been attested to by many people: rushing out of control through darkness toward "a brief glimpse of daylight far ahead where the end of the tunnel must be" (74)—which turns out to be a vortex into a yet deeper abyss, a canal flowing into the chilling waters of the Baltic Sea. The tin soldier, for his part, focuses not on a Christian deity but rather fulfills his interior code which by now has become conjoined with holding steadfast to the glowing form of his beloved ballerina. She sustains him from a distance, even at the nadir. Now in his time of need, the actual physical distance between them is irrelevant. She is there with him, iridescent in the darkness. He can feel her supportive presence all around him, giving him strength and assurance:

The tin soldier stood in water up to his neck; deeper and deeper sank the boat, softer and softer grew the paper, until at last the water closed over the soldier's head. He thought of the lovely little dancer whom he would never see again, and in his ears rang the words of a song:

'Onward, onward, warrior brave!  
Fear not danger, nor the grave.'

Then the paper boat collapsed entirely. (74)

The paper boat saturated with water, becoming "softer and softer" as it folds inward upon itself, intersects with the paper ballerina; it is into her arms and body that he falls, losing all sense of self. *La petite morte*. Love, the text suggests, has nothing to do with physical proximity; it exists beyond space and time. Precisely this same understanding of the absolute nature of love

has been felt by countless human beings over countless generations during times of extreme danger or when facing death. This is assuredly the reason why “The Steadfast Tin Soldier” has struck a special resonance with people caught up within wars over the last 190 years.

Then we encounter one of those sudden reversals for which Andersen is renowned: “Out fell the tin soldier—and he was promptly swallowed up by a fish” (74). Once again, he finds stillness. His journey has reached an apparent end, and all he must do now is wait and be dissolved by the corrosive stomach acid of the fish. It is a terrible death, but his reaction remains the same: steadfast.

Oh, how dark it was in the fish’s stomach! It was even worse than the tunnel, and very much more cramped. But the tin soldier’s courage remained unchanged; there he lay, as steadfast as ever, his musket still at his shoulder. (74)

The Biblical connotations were surely apparent to Andersen, steeped in the Protestant ethic of 19th-century Denmark (he was a member of the Danish Lutheran Church). Jonah, in the Old Testament account, was swallowed by a whale for three days and nights; in the darkness of its belly he learned how to pray again and renewed his spiritual vocation as a prophet, at which point he was vomitted forth back into the human world.<sup>19</sup> Likewise in Andersen, stasis shifts into action, and the soldier is violently resurrected, as by a cesarean birth, or the apocalypse signaled by “a streak of lightning”—the fish’s belly sliced open, another creature sacrificed instead of himself—and back in the same home, among familiar faces:

Something flashed through like a streak of lightning—then all around was cheerful daylight, and a voice called out, “The tin soldier!”

The fish had been caught, taken to market, sold and carried into the kitchen, where the cook had cut it open with a large knife. Now she picked up the soldier, holding him round his waist between her finger and thumb, and took him into the living room, so that all the family could see the remarkable character who had travelled about inside a fish. But the tin soldier was not at all proud. They stood him on the table, and there—well, the world is full of wonders!—he saw that he was in the very same room where his adventures had started; there were the very same children; there were the very same toys [. . .] (75)

The circle is complete. The safe domestic rhythm of the room enters the tin soldier again, as if nothing had changed. Perhaps his twenty-four brothers were vaguely aware that he had gone, but by this time had gotten used to his absence. Returned from the dead, from the mythic zone back into the living, what an extraordinary perception is now his: to observe everything with eyes which have seen and accepted nothingness—to come back to ordinary life, from that shadow kingdom where everything dissolves into darkness. As the ancient Greeks said, somewhere: “He who has faced death sees everything with new eyes.”

What he immediately sees is the ballerina, in her muslin dress, blue ribbon and sparkling

spangle. The connection of their eyes remains as authentic as before. Yet it is only the continuation of what he has held in his heart every instant of his journey.

[. . .] there was the fine paper castle with the graceful little dancer at the door. She was still poised on one leg, with the other raised high in the air. *Ah, she was steadfast too.* The tin soldier was deeply moved; he would have liked to weep tin tears, only that would not have been soldierly behaviour. He looked at her, and she looked at him, but not a word passed between them. (75) (my emphasis)

Both tin soldier and paper ballerina are here subsumed under the same ethical code, at least from the soldier's perspective. A further nuance is added to the image-complex of steadfastness: the notion of fidelity, and shared empathy with suffering.

That's our first way of reading. The second might cogently argue that the ballerina remains deeply engrossed in practising her pirouette, which requires a discipline as rigorous as a monk's, and could care less that he enters the room. As Alison Lurie bluntly puts it: "the cardboard dancer in 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' pays no attention to the protagonist" (5). Lisa Praestgaard Andersen, in her study of the *femme fatale* in Anderson's work, characterizes the dancer as one of the "cold women, empty, or conceited and pompous" such as the glacier-maiden in "The Ice Maiden," and "The Snow Queen": "The ballerina [. . .] can do nothing but strike attitudes. She has an empty mind and only an external badge of honour and merit, a glittering spangle" (8). Throughout the text she is seen only through male eyes; her characterization filters through the soldier's perspective, who admittedly is biased, his exclusivity creating the hinge which allows the dichotomous levels of the narrative to occur.

Even at this penultimate juncture, the tin soldier remains true to his vow of silence, despite struggling within himself between conflicting emotions, not even permitting a tear to escape. But is "soldierly behaviour" again the actual reason he remains noncommittal at this crucial point of reunion? Or is it yet another prevarication, hiding the fundamental reason for his reticence throughout the text, that he is made of tin and cannot speak, being only a toy—and a defective one, at that? Once again, the alternative mode of reading kicks in: could it be that he prefers her to remain anonymous in his mind, a psychic configuration rather than an actual corporeal presence with its messy complications of practicality and commitment? Is his voice buried so deep inside him that if he attempted to retrieve it, only a strangled moan would emerge (similar to another Scandinavian's version, Edvard Munch's "The Scream" fifty-five years later)? Is the central principle of his existence an honesty that prohibits all spoken language as a lie? In any case, the sudden juxtaposition of a woman who has become archetypal in his psychic topography, with the actual breathing being, is dramatic.

For the tin soldier, it is as if no time has passed at all. In love, there is no time. Time is a lie told by grown-ups to make us forget what we once knew. Somehow (*he believes*) she understands all he has been through—after all, she was there, looking out through his heart—and he has remained likewise in this room with her, poised in a classic tiptoe ballet *plie*, in front of the remote castle from which he is forever exiled. The perspective of the text is

ambiguous whether he now notices that in fact she is not disabled but has two legs, but it makes no difference. In the world they have already entered, it doesn't matter what kind of body one has, the shape of one's limbs, how one looks, one's social status, age or ethnic origin. Everything flows into a shared substratum. But now, he has a new selfhood won through his perilous journey which has been a voyage into the interior as much as the exterior landscape. By successively abandoning one enclosure after another, from his cramped box to a children's room to the outside world and its bewildering immensity, he has achieved a radical transformation. He is ready at last to commit himself to that most dangerous quest of all: love.

The climax of the story comes brutally swift:

And then a strange thing happened. One of the small boys picked up the tin soldier and threw him into the stove. He had no reason for doing this; it must have been the snuff-box goblin's fault. (75)<sup>20</sup>

If we look back now at the prior references to the goblin, we note that his culpability is invariably accompanied by a subtle textual equivocality, probably even stronger in the original Danish: "The goblin may have been responsible, or perhaps a draught blowing through—anyhow [. . .]" (72), "Yes, it must be the goblin's doing" (73), "it [the ballerina flying into the fire] must have been the snuff-box goblin's fault" (75). Just as Andersen questions why the tin soldier remains quiescent, so he leaves the door open as to whether the goblin is the definitive villain. Ambiguity becomes part of the enigma of evil. If the goblin is to blame, as a convenient scapegoat, then it is the goblin within every person, not a separate jack-in-the-box. The origin of evil remains inexplicable as love. It could be defined as the urge to destroy anything that exists outside itself. It waits within the snuff-box.<sup>21</sup>

"The tin soldier stood framed in a blaze of light" (75). This is the ultimate test of his steadfastness. There could be no greater irony: to journey through all his ordeals and return home again, only to lose everything at the last moment. Yet his gaze remains constant, across the room to the ballerina, linking them and silently calling. Even as he melts, he maintains steadfast form.<sup>22</sup> Thus the extent of his paralysis only now becomes devastatingly clear: *he cannot go to her. She must come to him, if he is ever to be saved, i.e., become an 'ordinary' human being.* For her, there is no hesitation: a mistress of balance (poised so long on a single point, not committing herself to the next step of the dance which turns out to be a *pas de deux*—she was waiting for her absent partner), she performs the most profoundly graceful choreography of her career, swirling across the room through the air—the equivalent of the soldier's fall from the window, carried by the same capricious wind—into his arms, in the stove.

He looked at the pretty little dancer, and she looked at him; he felt that he was melting away, but he still stood steadfast, shouldering arms. Suddenly the door flew open; a gust of air caught the little paper girl, and she flew like a sylph right into the stove, straight to the waiting tin soldier; there she flashed into flame and vanished. (75-76)

What are we to make of this climax? I would call it bittersweet, or sweetbitter: like love, which always must end, one way or another. The tin soldier is consumed by a double fire, both inner and outer, as expressed in the most poignant line of the story: "The heat was intense, but whether this came from the fire or his burning love, he could not tell" (75). At last he sheds his constricting uniform, his rigid stance; the frozen features of his face and bones melt with hers. Surely in that final *consummation*—and we are reminded of the etymology of that enigmatic word which signifies both the point at which something is complete or finalized and passionate union between man and woman—they are joined in a more absolute way than anyone could imagine, their very atoms intermingling, fused by flame, as of an atomic bomb, or a star. No longer toys destined to live as a secondary existence to amuse children, they become ashes together.

The story ends:

The soldier presently melted down to a lump of tin, and the next day, when the maid raked out the ashes she found him—in the shape of a little tin heart. And the dancer? All that they found was her sequin, and that was as black as soot. (76)

Here, in the final sentences of the narrative just before it enters the silence it has consistently wooed, the two modes of reading/listening which I have traced in this essay oscillate at shorter frequencies until they elide in a single composite image. Suddenly the text inverts on us, in the way all great literature does, and we realize that it is our own lives we have been extrapolating into the narrative. We are left to make a final interpretative decision. We can take the narrative straight, like a whiskey. Or we can be pulled under by a riptide of questioning, second thoughts and probing. Here, opacity occurs in the fact that the tin soldier's heart endures in the same transcendent shape despite his body melting—in the Rinzai Zen sense, he has solved his koan, *Show me your original face before you were born*; whereas the ballerina is distilled to what may well be the tawdry essence of a spangle burned "black" as the goblin. Obviously a fake jewel. Both readings seem equally plausible, indeed elicited, depending on how one feels at any given moment or phase in one's own relationships, together constituting yet a third textual harmonic: not Kierkegaard's *either/or*, but *both/and*, Andersen's genius for "turn[ing]. . .unsettling questions into an act of radical bewilderment" (Caldwell 7).<sup>23</sup> There are never any definitive answers. The relationship between man and woman is always founded on unknowing.

Time flows on, and the tin soldier and the ballerina exist to be bequeathed to a future generation, child and adult alike, after the bloodiest century of the planet. Nothing is ever lost, only changes shape and continues anew. So this story seems to tell us, though as a reader I remain in the inferno with the two small lovers, in that instant of their coming together, uniting in a sudden flare of light—the ultimate silence at the centre of the universe.

## NOTES

- 1 Hans Christian Andersen, *Eventyr, fortalte for Born [Tales, told for Children]* (Copenhagen, 1835, 1838), trans. Naomi Lewis (Oxford UP: 1974), "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" 4. All future reference to this primary text are given parenthetically.
- 2 "More than five-sixths of his [Andersen's] 156 tales include death in some form" (Wullschlager 419). Alison Lurie notes: "though some of his stories are brilliant and moving, most are sad, distressing, or even terrifying" (6). Interestingly, this doesn't seem to bother European teachers, who actively promote Anderson as part of the primary and secondary school curricula, rarely mentioning the possibility of a detrimental effect.
- 3 By 1843, Andersen deleted the subtitle "told for children" from subsequent collections, calling them simply *Nye Eventyr (New Tales)*. On his 70th birthday in 1875, the city of Copenhagen honoured him by proposing a monument of him reading his stories to a cluster of children around his knees. Andersen strongly objected about the latter detail, the sculptor relented and it was finally made showing him reading without children. His own explanation of the origin of his stories, in an 1843 letter to a friend, was: "I tell stories of my own accord, seize an idea for the adults—and then tell it for children while still keeping in mind the fact that mother and father are often listening too, and they must have a little something for thought" (qtd. in Lederer 94). This multiplicity of listening to an oral delivery by a storyteller—always Andersen's forte—required an extraordinary contrapuntal ability.
- 4 For an excellent discussion of the problematical nineteenth-century English editions of Andersen, see W. Glyn Jones, "Hans Christian Andersen in English. A Feasibility Study 1" (1993). Victorian translators of Andersen did not know Danish and worked from German translations, creating garbled nursery editions which bear little resemblance to the original texts.
- 5 It's often been observed that Andersen placed himself in many of his tales as a minor character who is the origin of the tale. "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" is no exception: the author's signature is reflected in the figure of the tinsmith who makes the soldier, hence setting into motion the entire narrative. On an autobiographical level, the tinsmith represents Andersen's cobbler father who instilled in his son a love of literature; and Andersen, with his famous inferiority complex, dovetails into the one-legged soldier.
- 6 For a full examination of Andersen's shyness toward and disastrous relationship with women, see Lederer (122-131, 'The Jilted Lover'). Andersen's journals (trans. Conroy and Rossel 1991) show that he remained celibate all his life, a lonely, awkward man. He fell in love and was rejected several times, enough to make unrequited love an ingrained plot-line in many of his stories.
- 7 Zipes points out that these bourgeois culture values were instilled upon Anderson by his surrogate family, the Collins, in Copenhagen in the 1830s. Their letters to him constantly exhort him to toe the straight and narrow line.
- 8 The Hans Christian Andersen museum in Odense, Denmark, contains many paper cut-outs that Andersen delighted in making for children, often quite elaborate, almost a kind of Japanese *origami*. These include a ballet dancer poised on one foot, the other stretched high in the air. See Johan de Mylius, director of the Hans Christian Andersen Centre in Odense <[www.andersen.sdu.dk/index.e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/index.e.html)>.
- 9 One of Andersen's earliest memories was of Spanish and French soldiers roaming the streets of Odense during the Napoleonic war in 1808 in which his own father enlisted, returning two years later broken in spirit, which led to his premature death (see Holbek 150). Wullschlager notes that "Denmark in the 1820s was a shell-shocked country, still reeling from a series of disasters: defeat in the war and the loss of Norway in 1814; national bankruptcy in 1813; the English bombardment of the city in 1807; Britain's victory in the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801" (52). Andersen's later trips through Europe were often complicated by war, such as the Prussian war of the 1840s. All this gives

historical relevance to the military metaphors used in this narrative.

- 10 The tin soldier's reluctant admittance that "there certainly isn't room for her" in his box with twenty-five other soldiers if he were to bring her home as a bride, contains wry humour but also a bitter truth. For his first few years in Copenhagen after he arrived as a 14-year old country boy, Andersen lived in a tiny room with no window, located in the slum district, shuttling back and forth between subsistence poverty and the luxurious drawing-rooms of prospective patrons on whom his existence depended on impressing. Throughout his life, he never actually lived in a home of his own, but rather in a succession of rented rooms, often hotels.
- 11 Yet another nuance is possible. Andersen kept an almanac in which he meticulously recorded with the mark of a cross every time he masturbated, which was frequently, particularly during those times he was obsessed with a particular woman (or man). Tin soldier—what are you doing behind that snuff-box?
- 12 The most likely candidate for the ballerina in this tale is not "the Swedish nightingale" Jenny Lind, but rather Riborg Voigt, Andersen's first love, to whom he proposed although she was already engaged to a chemist's son whom she eventually married. At this time (c. 1830), Andersen drew a portrait of himself, entitled "Self-portrait Confined in a Bottle," in which he is enclosed in a flask, limbs desperately straining against the glass in a vain attempt to reach a winged woman who floats above him, forever out of reach. His constriction here, with elongated arm desperately trying to open the stopper of the bottle, echoes the posture and plight of the tin soldier.



- 13 In other translations of "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," the goblin is called variously a troll, hobgoblin, imp, or bogey. The snuffbox location may be significant, for it signifies a trick played on anyone who opens the elegant box expecting snuff, and its presence in a child's room shows the background milieu of bourgeois adult life.

Editions consulted: Lang (1894), Hersholt (1949), Lemoine (1983), Ash and Higton (1992), Seidler (



1993). In most cases the translator is not even cited, only the person who 'retold,' 'adapted' or 'compiled' the story. In America and England, Andersen is still regarded as belonging to the nursery, and anybody can have a go at him, bowdlerizing and changing at will. There is still no scholarly edition available in English.

- 14 The tin soldier's position here iconographically mirrors the ballerina's, in the sense that for the first time both have one leg raised. He has to be upside-down to achieve this gymnastic feat, yet it's a start. For a rather heavy Freudian view, see William Mishler: the soldier "with his bayonet and missing leg [is] both erect and castrated [. . .] The soldier's love and his steadfastness are linked by way of an absence, a blanking out of erotic desire [. . .] He forbids himself the dancer with the very breath with which he appropriates her [. . .] Seeing [her] will keep her at a distance [. . .] Steadfastness is another name for fear" (390ff).
- 15 All translations specify the paper boat is made from a newspaper. This fits in with the suggested context of contemporary warfare. The soldier is 'published' as a visual design, literally carried by the newspaper as he flows down the city gutter.
- 16 Copenhagen was notorious in the early nineteenth century for its "dreadful stench [. . .] dung in the streets and dirty water in the canals [. . .] particles of straw, potato peelings and old boot soles which swam in a blackish-grey slime in open gutters[ . . .] All this in one of the most overcrowded cities in Europe, where large families often lived in one room, every cellar and tiny attic and outhouse was occupied, and a population of 120,000 was crammed into one area, which is today occupied by 25,000" (Wullschlager 45-46).
- 17 This episode evokes the following in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:  

"I think we are in rats' alley  
 Where the dead men lost their bones."  
 (from 'A Game of Chess,' 115-16)

Here the speaker is responding to his neurotic wife's frantic questions, presumably modeled upon Eliot's own marriage. The allusion is to the valley of death in Ezekial. Eliot is reported to have said that it is a pity we read Andersen's fairy tales as children, because we miss much of their adult relevance (qtd. in Lederer 221).
- 18 A gentle dig at himself. Anderson was an anxious traveller and hypochondriac, forever misplacing his passport and train tickets. See Wullschlager 199-200.
- 19 See Jonah 1.17-2.10. In this allegorical sense, Jonah "flee[ing] [. . .] from the presence of the Lord" (Jon. 1.2-3) on a ship overtaken by a storm is synonymous with the tin soldier fleeing the possibility of love, and his return to the bourgeois home is equivalent to Ninevah, if this is not stretching it too far.
- 20 In yet another recent rendition of the tale (Seidler), illustrator Fred Marcellino postulates that the child who throws the tin soldier into the stove is the boy to whom the soldier was given as a birthday present, who loves the tin soldier and is disconsolate that the soldier in turn loves the ballerina. A fascinating implication, though it would seem to be unsupported by Andersen's original text.
- 21 Post WWII readers of Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" have often pointed out that the episode of the witch attempting to burn the two children in her oven is a nightmarish prefiguring of the Holocaust, where countless Jews ended up in crematoriums. The same could be said for the ending of Andersen's tale.
- 22 Tin, one of the most ancient metals known to man, is highly malleable, melting at only 230 degrees C., quicker than paper. It gels into a new form, which makes it ideal for Andersen's metaphor. A soft metal, easily melted: the male psyche.
- 23 One of the most unlikely relationships in literary history was that between Soren Kierkegaard and Andersen. As a 25-year-old theology student, Kierkegaard's first book was a scathing critique of Andersen, *Af en Endnu Levendes Papirer* [*From the Papers of a Person Still Alive*] (1838), subtitled, "On Andersen as a Novelist, with constant regard to his most recent work, *Only a Fiddler*". It seems that Kierkegaard

had not at this time read Andersen's *Eventyr*. Numerous scholarly papers in Europe explore the intertextuality between Kierkegaard and Andersen. See Wulschlager 181-82, and Frank and Frank 11-12. Wulschlager stresses the similarities between the two authors, including "both chose sexual abstinence and linked sex with fear and dread" (182). Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* was published in 1843.

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