ADELE TUTTER

**“To Half Believe and Wholly Play”:
Dialectics of Reality in Beatrix Potter’s
*The Tale of Two Bad Mice***

What a great deal we lose in growing wise!
—Beatrix Potter, 1891, *The Journal
of Beatrix Potter, 1891-1897*

“The Dark Journey of Life”

On June 24, 1884, the seventeen year-old Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) recorded in her heavily encrypted journal that the Reverend William Gaskell—a Unitarian minister and treasured family friend, of whom she had been inordinately fond—had been buried that day. In a photograph taken with Gaskell at age ten, a serious young Beatrix leans toward her friend, perfectly comfortable as he holds her in his firm embrace, one hand around her waist and the other clasping her hand (Fig. 1, left). In the previous year Potter had suffered the loss of a grandfather and an uncle; the departure for boarding school of her only sibling, her eleven year-old brother Bertram; the leave-taking of her beloved governess; and, just a few months before Gaskell’s burial, the death of another precious relative, her grandmother Jane Leech, which Potter duly noted in her journal with the briefest of comments: “There will be no one soon” (Potter, 1989b, p. 62). It was only after Rev. Gaskell’s death that she entrusted to her journal an emotional outpouring, setting loose a raft of memories of happy times together, and asking herself,

Shall I really never see him again? but he is gone with
almost every other, home is gone for me, the little girl
does not bound about now, and live in fairyland, and

occasionally wonder in a curious carefree manner...[on] what life means...It is all gone, and he is resting quietly with our fathers. I have begun the dark journey of life. (Potter, 1989b, p. 94)

And a dark journey it would be. Potter took ill, suffering from sleeplessness, fatigue, and headaches, "neuralgia" and "odious" moods for the better part of the two years following Gaskell's death, during which she lost much of her hair, the rest of which was cropped short. A photograph from that time of a hollow-eyed Potter speaks of a private anguish—relieved, perhaps, by what rests in the palm of her hand: a tiny, and apparently well-fed, mouse (Fig. 1, right).

A brilliant, exquisitely sensitive and imaginative girl, Potter was perhaps more vulnerable than usual to the harsher realities of life; luckily for her, she was unusually able to elude them by retreating into "fairyland," an intricate fantasy world over which she had complete control. She may thus have had more difficulty than most leaving childhood behind. When she did, she noted, as in this entry from 1884,

...the greatest change is in myself. I was a child then, I had no idea what the world would be like...seeing my own fancies so clearly that they became true to me, I lived in a separate world...it has been a terrible time since, and the future is dark and uncertain, let me keep the past. (1989b, p. 85)

She could not: "How time does go, and once past it can never be regained" (p. 75). And yet her deeply felt memories laid claim to that past and the loved ones in it, holding them close. In "Memories of Camfield Place," an essay composed in 1891, the year her adored grandmother and role model, Jessy Crompton Potter,¹ died at Camfield, Potter writes that she "shall never want [i.e., need] a record to remind me of this perfect whole":

To me all [of Camfield] is bound up together in fact and fancy, my dear grandmother, the place I love best in the world and the sweet balmy air where I have been so happy as a child. (1989b, p. 444)

Figure 1. Left: “*Shall I really never see him again?*” Beatrix Potter and the Rev. William Gaskell. From Lear, 2007, p. 136. Right: *Beatrix Potter with Her Pet Mouse Xarifa*, Cotsen Children’s Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Photo: Princeton University Library. “*Now that the sheep is shorn, I may say without pride that I have seldom seen a more beautiful head of hair than mine*” (Potter, 1989b, pp. 144-145).

Potter never forgot how crucial fantasy is to a child—how enticing it is to play inside it, and what a respite it can provide, outside the boundaries of an unpredictable and often painful reality.

Indeed, the exploration and manipulation of reality is at the very *heart* of play (Winnicott, 1971), and Potter’s appreciation of this contributes to the tremendous empathy for children evident in her stories. As a child, Potter was forbidden to socialize with others her age for her fear of “germs”; aside from nurses and governesses and her little brother Bertram, her usual companions were the numerous and diverse members of her private menagerie, after which she named her “characters,” many of them wild animals she domesticated—snails, lizards, rabbits, a hedgehog, birds, frogs, snakes...and mice (Fig. 2, left). Children were, and are still, her primary audience. A childless adult, she enjoyed corresponding with the children of others, and she developed many of her books from the il-

illustrated letters she wrote them: in her words, "it is much more satisfactory to address a real live child" (Potter, 1989a, p. 132). First published in 1904, *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* was originally written for Wilfred Warne, the adored niece of Norman Warne, her publisher. It was during the writing of *Two Bad Mice* that Warne became Potter's fiancé, and the dollhouse he built for his niece Wilfred became the model for the one in the story (Fig. 2, right). To prepare for its illustration, Potter, who always had a special affection for mice, spent time studying two that she had trapped and tamed, letting them play and wander in another little house made by Warne just for them according to Potter's specifications, a naturalistic "laboratory" fitted with a glass wall for easy observation.²

Two Bad Mice has long been understood as autobiographical, a view encouraged by Potter herself. Commenting to Warne on its dollhouse setting, she allowed that it was "the kind of house where one cannot sit down without upsetting something, I know the sort!" (1989a, p. 93) Kutzer's (2003) study construes the story as a satirical portrait of upper class pretension set against a backdrop of social unrest in Victorian England, as well as a barely veiled representation of the author's resentful struggle to separate from her *nouveau riche* parents (who were horrified by their outwardly decorous daughter's engagement to a *tradesman*) and their various crimes of propriety. Indeed, there was already a hint of rebellion in journal notes made twenty years earlier, during the years of her malaise. Mainly concerned with morbid stories, ruthless art criticism, and informed comments on politics and events at home and abroad—especially riots and uprisings—these entries also include the occasional animal anecdote. On Saturday, March 28, 1885, Potter states drily that her "hair nearly all came off since I was ill" and that her "few remaining locks" were "clipped short at Douglas's. Draughty" (1989b, p. 144). Never dwelling on herself, she moves on to report on deaths in Glasgow, rumors of "ghastly stories" regarding French losses in Tong-King, and then this curious bulletin:

There are signs that the domestic animals are revolting.
From Holborn comes news that one Mr. Ashton, return-

Figure 2. Left: *Beatrix Potter and Benjamin Bouncer*, 1891. Cotsen Children's Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Photo: Princeton University Library. Right: Wilfred Warne and her dollhouse, 1905; photograph by Norman Warne. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Winifred_Warne_and_the_Doll_House.jpg

ing home, discovered his black tom had two visitors in the passage, whom Mr. Ashton proceeded to eject, but all three set on him, and after a violent struggle Mr. Ashton was driven precipitously out at the front door, and fell into the arms of two policemen who took him to the hospital. (1989b, p. 145)

(Nor, apparently, did Mrs. Ashton escape harm.) This macabre account, in which two trespassing animals wreak havoc, is notable for prefiguring the plot of *Two Bad Mice*, in which two mice conduct a dollhouse invasion.

Animal characters allow readers the connection and closeness of fantasy-based identification and, when necessary, the safety and distance of reality-based dis-identification (Gose, 1988). So like adults, and so unlike adults, children relate to the essential *difference* of animals—so like us and yet so unlike us in their subservience and resilience, their vulnerability and pluck, their wildness and their wiles, and their often reluctant acquiescence to dependent domesticity. However entertaining

Potter's non-human characters are, they showcase their creator's razor-sharp perception of human emotions, motivations, and interactions.³ Collectively, these "immorality tales" comprise a rather subversive psychological "primer" that introduces children ever so gently to the not-very-nice world of adults—the world they will encounter when they embark on their own "dark journey of life." At the same time, Potter's stories reflect a sensitive grasp of the child's *current* world—her impulses and frustrations, her curiosity and wonder, her intelligence and imagination, and as I wish to stress, her kaleidoscopic inner life in which fantasy and reality still mingle at will. She was, I contend, a consummate psychologist.

And so it comes as something of a surprise that only a handful of psychoanalytic scholars have addressed these stories; notable exceptions include Alexander Grinstein, whose biography, *The Remarkable Beatrix Potter* (1995), examines the stories, and Ellen Handler Spitz, who devotes part of a chapter of *Inside Picture Books* (2000) to several stories. The valuable contributions of several literary critics, including Carpenter (1989), Harris (1997), and Kutzer (2003) are psychologically sensitive, as is Lear's recent comprehensive biography (2007). The relative neglect of Potter's stories may be a paradoxical result of their tremendous economy, but one must also take into account the unfortunate trivialization caused by the Beatrix Potter merchandising juggernaut.⁴ If her oeuvre is underappreciated, however, no doubt the greatest blame lies in the prejudice against children's books as something less than "literature," a trend many are now working to reverse.

Potter's anthropomorphic animal characters, central to the fantasy element of her stories, draw on the legacy of the classical metamorphic myths in which human beings are changed into non-human forms. In discussing fantasies of transformation, Searles (1960) observes that the "yearning to become nonhuman" often indicates a longing "to regress phylogenetically, to 'return' symbolically to the nonhuman state out of which the human race emerged...in order to get a fresh start in the struggle to achieve individuation, and subsequent emotional maturation, as a human being" (p. 250). To sharpen this argument, the fantasy of assuming an earlier phylogenetic state may

metaphorically symbolize the (no less fantastical) wish to regress to an earlier *developmental* state (Tutter, 2011a, 2011b)—to turn back, rather than forward, on the “dark journey of life.” By extension, one of the ways for Potter to revisit the amusement and wonder of a child’s unfettered, unjaded imagination was to create fantasy stories populated by animals. Confirming the personal importance of her books, Potter wrote Warne, “I always feel very much lost when they are finished” (1989a, p. 120). Her characters sport antiquarian dress and mannerisms, creating a gentle nostalgia: by recollecting and preserving aspects of bygone times, they transform loss into literature. In particular, Humphrey Carpenter (1989) brilliantly argues that Potter’s published prose emulates the formal, Regency-era voice of Jessie Crompton Potter, mixed with more than a hint of the Biblical.

Surely the motif of the dollhouse is an exquisite symbolic condensation of aspects of Potter’s interiority, including her object relations, conflicts around autonomy, and ideological sympathies. Yet, although it is tempting to develop the formulation of *Two Bad Mice* as an expressive projection of Potter’s inner life, here I will treat it instead as a valuable window onto the inner life of the *child* for whom she writes, especially her evolving, oscillating play with fantasy and reality, and the pressing needs and turbulent emotions triggered at that interface. I will trace how that evolution and oscillation functions within Potter’s text—not only worked thematically into its narrative, but also deftly embedded within its prose, engaging the young reader and enjoining her to “play” along. To the extent to which incursions into the author’s psychology seem unavoidable, I will limit them to comments on those themes central to the story that also relate directly to her life.

Let us now turn to *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*. The stage is set in the opening lines.

The Tale of Two Bad Mice

Once upon a time there was a very beautiful doll’s-house; it was red brick with white windows, and it had real muslin curtains and a front door and a chimney.

We know where we are from the start, for "*Once upon a time*" establishes the story's orientation, placing us squarely in "fairyland." The dollhouse is painted amidst other playthings of childhood—a jump rope and badminton rackets—demonstrating both the house's miniature scale and the relative privilege of its ostensible owner. Reinforcing the idea of "play," a doll perches on the dollhouse roof. But we also learn that this deluxe dollhouse has "real" muslin curtains and other realistic details.

It belonged to two Dolls called Lucinda and Jane; at least it belonged to Lucinda, but she never ordered meals.

Jane was the Cook; but she never did any cooking, because the dinner had been bought ready-made, in a box full of shavings.

The fantasy notion of the dolls' roles of mistress and cook excludes the existence of the child to whom the dollhouse must belong. This pretense, however, is immediately challenged by the curious observation that Jane, the doll "cook," "never did any cooking."⁵ The entire story continues this seesaw between reality and fantasy.

There were two red lobsters and a ham, a fish, a pudding, and some pears and oranges.

They would not come off the plates, but they were extremely beautiful (Fig. 3, left).

Rendered as artfully as a "real" still life, the lusciously "life-like" toy food invites our admiration, as it did the author's.⁶ Lest we forget that it is inedible, the "box of shavings" in which it arrived remains in the background.

One morning Lucinda and Jane had gone out for a drive in the doll's perambulator. There was no one in the nursery, and it was very quiet. Presently there was a little scuffling, scratching noise in a corner near the fireplace, where there was a hole under the skirting-board.

Tom Thumb put out his head for a moment, and then popped it in again. Tom Thumb was a mouse.

While Lucinda and Jane have “gone out” on a make-believe “drive,” the illustration of two mice peeking out of a mouse hole leaves no doubt as to “who” (or “what”) Tom Thumb is, and thus his identification is wonderfully superfluous.

A minute afterwards, Hunca Munca, his wife, put her head out, too; and when she saw that there was no one in the nursery, she ventured out on the oilcloth under the coal-box.

Here Potter introduces the fabulous notion that mice can behave just like us: if mice can “marry,” the “wife” will be the one most interested in real estate, especially the “open house” down the block.

The doll's-house stood at the other side of the fire-place. Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca went cautiously across the hearthrug. They pushed the front door—it was not fast.

It seems this “working” front door is not, however, outfitted with a lock. (It really is an “open house”!)

Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca went upstairs and peeped into the dining-room. Then they squeaked with joy! Such a lovely dinner was laid out upon the table! There were tin spoons, and lead knives and forks, and two dolly-chairs—all SO convenient!

Here Potter comments on the child’s proclivity for the miniature: so too will a child be delighted by how “convenient” it is that the dolls’ furniture and utensils are *just right* for mice—in fact, far better suited to them than to the too-large dolls, a “fact” that ironically stabilizes the notion of mice sitting at table and eating with fork and knife (one that is only slightly more fantastical for mice than for little children). But unlike the mice, the child reader is looking ahead, aware that the mice are delighted for a slightly different reason than she—that the mice are *not just* “playing house.” The scenario is masterfully laid out: the tension builds, and is almost unbearable.

Tom Thumb set to work at once to carve the ham. It was a beautiful shiny yellow, streaked with red.

Figure 3. These and other illustrations from *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* (Potter, 1904). Left: "They would not come off the plates, but they were extremely beautiful" (p. 11). Right: "It is not boiled enough; it is hard. You have a try, Hunca Munca" (p. 21).

The knife crumpled up and hurt him; he put his finger in his mouth.

"It is not boiled enough; it is hard. You have a try, Hunca Munca" (Fig. 3, right).

The ham is not real, but the harm is. As every injured child will, Tom Thumb immediately puts his "finger" in his mouth, looking as touchingly vulnerable as the voracious child reprimanded for her unseemly appetite at table.

Hunca Munca stood up in her chair, and chopped at the ham with another lead knife.

"It's as hard as the hams at the cheesemonger's," said Hunca Munca.

As the truth looms, we learn that mice can not only talk but also rationalize; discriminating consumers, they know the way around town, too.

The ham broke off the plate with a jerk, and rolled under the table. "Let it alone," said Tom Thumb; "give me some fish, Hunca Munca!"

Battling prodigious defenses, reality threatens to break in as the ham "breaks off" the plate. Still, wishes overrule logic—in mice as in man—and denial prevails.

Hunca Munca tried every tin spoon in turn; the fish was glued to the dish.

Then Tom Thumb lost his temper. He put the ham in the middle of the floor, and hit it with the tongs and with the shovel—bang, bang, smash, smash!

The ham flew all into pieces, for underneath the shiny paint it was made of nothing but plaster!

We know the recalcitrant food is “glued” on, but Tom Thumb will have his ham! He is simply unwilling to accept that the sham feast is, quite literally, *too good to be true*. And the truth is *not* good. Like a little child, he cannot contain his fury over this cruel deception, graphically portrayed, and articulated in the language of a child: “bang, bang!” On a more metaphorical level, the reader will also relate to the betrayal felt upon discovering that “underneath the shiny paint” what one believes is real goodness is in fact only *for show*.

Then there was no end to the rage and disappointment of Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca. They broke up the pudding, the lobsters, the pears and the oranges. As the fish would not come off the plate, they put it into the red-hot crinkly paper fire in the kitchen; but it would not burn either.

The mice are no longer able to avoid reality; their rage threatens to become “unending,” spiteful destruction its only outlet. Still, Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca are unwilling (or unable) to generalize their dismay and continue to test the reality of the other accouterments of the little house, including the fireplace. Behold the tongue-in-cheek twist, the marvelous reversal of reality that traces one such realization, concentrated in just a few words—“*the red-hot crinkly paper fire*.”

Tom Thumb went up the kitchen chimney and looked out at the top—there was no soot (Fig. 4, left).

As his apparent astonishment indicates, it is only dawning on our Doubting Thomas that the fireplace does not work either. What glee for a small child to see this—and to stay one step

ahead of the enterprising Tom Thumb! Note too how the dollhouse is thoughtfully drawn from the aspect of a child's height, its small scale emphasized by the bigness of the fly on its roof and Hunca Munca in the window. In a universe as large as ours, it is wonderful, for once, to feel so big!

While Tom Thumb was up the chimney, Hunca Munca had another disappointment. She found some tiny canisters upon the dresser, labeled—Rice—Coffee—Sago—but when she turned them upside down, there was nothing inside except red and blue beads.

The reader can virtually *hear* the promising rattle of the beads in the canisters, but these also betray, and the mice are left with nothing to eat. It is the last straw.

And then all hell breaks loose.

Then those mice set to work to do all the mischief they could—especially Tom Thumb! He took Jane's clothes out of the chest of drawers in her bedroom, and he threw them out of the top floor window.

But Hunca Munca had a frugal mind. After pulling half the feathers out of Lucinda's bolster, she remembered that she herself was in want of a feather bed.

At long last, "the domestic animals are revolting." Of course, it is up to the male of the species to make the most "mischief," leaving the frugal female homemaker to salvage something from the situation. And she does. Potter draws the wide-eyed Hunca Munca as she stops still amid the carnage as a wonderful idea comes to her: the food may not be "real," but the bedding is "*real enough*"—and the right size, too. The rampage shifts to plunder.

With Tom Thumb's assistance she carried the bolster downstairs, and across the hearth-rug. It was difficult to squeeze the bolster into the mouse-hole; but they managed it somehow.

Then Hunca Munca went back and fetched a chair, a book-case, a bird-cage, and several small odds and ends. The book-case and the bird-cage refused to go into the mouse-hole.

Hunca Munca left them behind the coal-box, and went to fetch a cradle.

As plausible as the bedding and the cradle's utility might be, the attempted abduction of the bookcase with its painted-on encyclopedia and the bird-cage with its tiny bird figurine is wildly, fabulously outlandish. The prose imparts these signifiers of refinement with a sort of magical, animated obstinacy: they "refuse" to go into the mouse hole, as if it were beneath their position to do so!

Just then, "reality" intrudes, again.

Hunca Munca was just returning with another chair, when suddenly there was a noise of talking outside upon the landing. The mice rushed back to their hole, and the dolls came into the nursery.

The dolls are pictured in their perambulator, but not the child who propels it, allowing the fantasy of the dolls' animated independence to coexist, with no little tension, with the presumptive reality of the child's return to the nursery. Amplifying the suspense, Potter uses scrupulously passive language to support this ambiguity—"and the dolls came into the nursery"—leav-

Figure 4. Left: "...there was no soot" (p. 31).
Right: "...neither of them made any remark" (p. 45).

ing it up to the child reader to extend the scene beyond its frame to include the imagined child doing (at least some of) the talking.

What a sight met the eyes of Jane and Lucinda! Lucinda sat upon the upset kitchen stove and stared; and Jane leant against the kitchen dresser and smiled—but neither of them made any remark (Fig. 4, right).

Lucinda's predetermined posture of alarm and flabbergasted "stare" are wholly congruent with the "sight" of the chaos that "meets their eyes." Using one's imagination, her servant Jane's permanently vague smile could be taken to mean any number of things. Still, having spoken about "a noise of talking," the author's pointed observation that "neither of them made any remark" alludes to the dubious nature of their "reaction."

The book-case and the bird-cage were rescued from under the coal-box—but Hunca Munca has got the cradle, and some of Lucinda's clothes.

She also has some useful pots and pans, and several other things (Fig. 5, left).

Now, for the first time, we are down inside the mouse-hole, another miniature house-within-a-house. And what a *different* world it is: warm and cozy, womb-like, with Hunca Munca standing guard over her babies, safely tucked in the pilfered cradle. It is the antithesis of the formal dollhouse that, with its plaster food and paper fire, invokes Potter's bitterly remembered London home, replete with the trappings of a happy childhood but lacking in nourishing parental warmth.⁷

More subtly, the contrasts drawn between the two miniature worlds playfully interrogate the nature of reality, questioning and disrupting the boundaries between the feasible and the fantastic that are no longer such a simple matter of real vs. not real. Both homes-within-homes are miniatures of "real" homes, but only one is a *real* home—or is it? Down in the mouse hole, the cradle is transformed from a "useless" dollhouse object for a doll that does not and cannot have babies to a "useful" object

for a mouse that has many. But what about the “other things,” such as the coal shovel and tea kettle, and the pots and pans Hunca Munca lovingly polishes—unless we fancy a tiny “real” fire in this tiny “real” home? By explicitly labeling “useful” those things that are so obviously “useless” in the dollhouse, Potter urges the reader to hope that Hunca Munca will indeed use them to prepare “real,” warm food.

The little girl that the doll's-house belonged to, said,—“I will get a doll dressed like a policeman!” (Fig. 5, right).

Figure 5. Left: “*She also has some useful pots and pans, and several other things*” (p. 49). Right: “*I will get a doll dressed like a policeman!*” (p. 51).

While this is the first actual mention of the little girl who owns the dollhouse, this reality element remains outside the drawn frame of the story. She must not be too upset by the mayhem, for her solution to the home invasion—the installation of a doll “dressed like” a policeman—is overtly, perversely “make-believe.” The impressively uniformed guard—who, judging from the young Thumbs scampering unimpeded around the house, is not doing such a good job—does not intimidate an emboldened Hunca Munca.

But the nurse said,—“I will set a mouse-trap!”

We have begun to wonder whether the landlord rather likes the idea of some new furry tenants—in other words, whether she might be a little like the author, who also remains unseen. But in contrast to her charge, the nurse is firmly planted in pragmatism, as a nurse would be—from a child's view at any rate. Showing rather than telling, Potter draws the family Thumb gathered around a wooden mousetrap, the senior Thumb (likewise) teaching his little ones about its peril with gestures. The mice are well aware of the danger of a trap set with *real* food, an ironic contrast to their seduction by pretend food. Luckily, just as the child reader has stayed a few steps ahead of the mice, now the mice join the reader in being a few steps ahead of the nurse. The alliance is final; we are rooting for *them*.

Fittingly enough, the concluding passage of the story questions the veracity of its title—the very premise of *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*.

So that is the story of the two Bad Mice,—but they were not so very very naughty after all, because Tom Thumb paid for everything he broke.

He found a crooked sixpence under the hearth-rug; and upon Christmas Eve, he and Hunca Munca stuffed it into one of the stockings of Lucinda and Jane.

Having demonstrated emotions of greed, frustration, disappointment, and revenge, "the two bad mice" are also capable of remorse and accountability. Could they "really" be *that* "bad"? But the "crooked sixpence" they "found" is not theirs to give; and the dolls are not really the ones to reimburse for damages. Yet, Lucinda stares fairly convincingly at the two mice busily stuffing the stocking hanging at the foot of her bed (at such a sight, you would too). Just as the dollhouse's proprietress can maintain a fantasy about the doll policeman, so can the mice—and the reader—maintain a fantasy about Lucinda and Jane.

And very early every morning—before anybody is awake—Hunca Munca comes with her dust-pan and her broom to sweep the Dollies' house!

Atoning for their misdeeds, Hunca Munca demonstrates her essential goodness—even though “*her* dustpan and *her* broom” are, in so-called “reality,” stolen goods. The morality of the story remains ambiguous—as is, we begin to suspect, everything in so-called “reality.” If the differences between “real life” and “fairyland” now seem a little less clear, we end, as we began, in “fairyland.”

“The Spirit-World of Childhood”

The French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1958/1969) observes, “miniature worlds...are dominated worlds” (p. 161), sanctuaries that receive and subdue projections. And as every child therapist (and every child) knows, a dollhouse is a powerful vehicle for the recruitment of those projections—as true now as in Potter’s time, as confirmed by these thoughts of a twelve year-old girl who has yet to surrender up her dollhouse:

When I play in my dollhouse I create stories, acting them out with tiny actors, with a script I make up as I go. I plan feasts and weddings, and trips to the pond (the bathroom sink). I make the dolls seem as human-like as possible: they eat food, their house is cleaned, they travel (to other places in the house), and they talk and laugh and cry and get injured. They get divorced, and make their beds. Unlike humans in one way, though, they can forget any past ‘life’, or change their present ‘life’ if they wish. If I drop a doll, I can easily pick her up and pretend that didn’t happen, and ignore the fact that in real life she should have been at least injured. My mind rarely goes to the outside world when I am playing with my dollhouse. Sometimes I feel what I am making the dolls feel. I remember a few times crying when I was little as I created an extremely sad story, the plot of which is now lost to me. Sometimes I get mad at my dolls for doing something that I made them do, which now seems very twisted. Sometimes if a situation is being played out by a doll that could very possibly hap-

pen to me, I'd probably make the doll do something I wish I could do. By choice, I never make my dolls like me. They are always more sensible, less sensible, more skilled, less skilled. But, if I went through my dollhouse and explained to you thoroughly the current personalities of every single doll, I wouldn't be surprised to find one or two overlooked dolls that are a bit like me. (Ursula Hudak, personal communication)

Witness the playing child's removal from the "real" world, and her immersion in and control over the malleable "imaginary" world, its matrix modeled after the life she observes around her. All is watched over by a "policeman," her developing superego. Until that psychic agency is more fully mature, the dollhouse serves as a receptacle for some of her instincts, impulses and fears—transformed into stories that its inhabitants "act out." While (almost) fully recognized as such, such externalized projections still need to be channeled, controlled, and contained within the safe boundaries of a physical structure. *Two Bad Mice* concretizes, and thereby illustrates this commonplace process: its commandeered dollhouse becomes a physical site of frustration, retribution and expiation, a *literal* container of exciting, explosive—indeed "animalistic"—emotions, fittingly symbolized by Potter's rebellious protagonists. These uncivilized animals present an unabashed contrast to the passive, tame, docile dolls—stand-ins for how civilized, starched little girls (and boys) were and sometimes still are expected to behave.

Indeed, these "adult" mice act more like "real" children: they get excited by an appetizing spread, they have unseemly appetites, they are impatient and break things when they are frustrated, they seek revenge and make messes and try to avoid getting caught being naughty. In this way, *Two Bad Mice* is delightfully "experience near." The action is trotted out like a play-by-play; indeed, Potter herself seems to be playing with her characters, using them to perform—just as children do with toys in play therapy—what she could not express, let alone *do*. As a place within a place, the dollhouse functions as a ready metaphor for the fantasy life that can exist underneath such a frozen facade: a private world with fenestrated, fluid boundar-

ies in which imagination, curiosity and greed can “run wild.” Likewise, on the surface, the toy food frustrates the mice’s “real” craving for “real” food, which also signifies the withholding lack of nourishing warmth and love in a home that appears to provide amply for its inhabitants. Thus the dialectics of *reality and fantasy* of the story are brilliantly paralleled by the closely related dialectics of *the physical and the abstract*: the play between the concrete realities and the symbolic meanings of its miniature world.

The dollhouse engenders myriad other metaphorical uses, all adding to its richness as a play object. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, with not only its dressed and talking animals but also its doll-like environment, was an important precursor to Potter’s stories. The image of Hunca Munca in the window of the dollhouse is reminiscent of the scene in which Alice grows increasingly “big” inside an uncomfortably small house (Fig. 6). If we view *Two Bad Mice* through the lens of the allegorical representation of the changes of adolescence that *Alice* offers (Tutter, 2011b), it can function as a parallel allegory for the disillusionments children will encounter along their “dark journey” from childhood to adulthood, as they “outgrow” their dollhouses and leave their parental home behind for a new home of their own. For now, the smallness of the dollhouse (and the mouse hole) achieves containment, rather than confinement.

As a piece of prose, *Two Bad Mice* is miraculously compact, its intricate maneuverings accomplished in well under one thousand words. Mirroring the scale of its two minuscule domiciles, it was originally printed in miniature format, as Potter insisted for all her books: little books announce that they are meant for little readers.⁸ And the little reader is well prepared to identify with little protagonists—especially one called “Tom Thumb,” after the tiny child in English folklore immortalized in stories such as the Brothers’ Grimm (and, as some adults might know, was joined by “Huncamunca” in Henry Fielding’s popular satirical 1730 play of the same name). Like the compact dollhouse, via physical containment the compact book subdues the greed, longing, disappointment, and rage concentrated within. Additional containment is afforded by

Figure 6. Left: detail from Figure 4 (p. 31). Right: from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll 1865, illustration by John Tenniel.

Potter's empathic laying out of the *reasons* for the rampage and the theft—the Thumb couple's frustrated longings, their fury over being deceived, and, a bit less convincingly, their real hunger and need (not to mention their socialist tendencies). The deliberate delivery and peaceful resolution of *Two Bad Mice* further metabolize and restrain its inherent and very realistic violence. Standing in amusingly high contrast to the mayhem that is described, its precise, cool, measured prose and delicately beautiful illustrations—all purposefully framed within the page with a hand-drawn border—also serve to “house” any dangerous feelings and subversive impulses elicited in identification with the “two bad mice.”⁹

At the same time, the story flirts with and tests the unstable and wavering limits of reality on multiple, recursive levels, endorsing and encouraging the operation of fantasy in the child's mind. Lest this generate too much anxiety, the unhurried, understated text alternates between fantasizing and reality testing with a steady regularity, letting the reader predict and anticipate the next reversal. There are no intemperate surprises, and reassuring reality is always close at hand. And by choosing the book's last picture for its cover—the penitent Hunca Munca crossing the dollhouse's threshold with her broom—Potter

thereby demonstrates from the outset, and reminds us every time we return to the book, that the “two bad mice” are not all that bad. Indeed, they have achieved a morality; the development of the story thus mirrors the development of the child’s morality, an achievement alluded to by the image, of Hunca Munca opening a door to the adult world of obligation and accountability (this one is not fast, either). Carrying “her” broom, the subtle ambiguity of her situation tells us that negotiating this new moral world is no simple thing.

A succession of stories reflect Potter’s ongoing experimentation with a variety of formal devices that encourage the reader to play with reality. Following close on the heels of *Two Bad Mice* was *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle* (1905b), which presents its fantasy narrative as the “dream” of an unusual human character, a little girl named Lucy. In her dream, she visits Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, a hedgehog who acts as laundress to a stable of animal clients. Again, there is a shrewd slippage between real and unreal: “the animals’ clothes, such as Peter Rabbit’s blue jacket, become confused with their skins—Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle’s wash includes ‘woolly coats belonging to the little lambs’ and a ‘velvety black moleskin waistcoat’” (Carpenter, 1989, p. 285). Only at the end of the story does Lucy waken to discover Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle’s “true” identity, about which she has had slowly dawning suspicions, but here, too, ambiguity surrounds Lucy’s alleged “dream” state. The deliberate bending of reality is a central narrative conceit in *The Pie and the Patty Pan* (1905a), published in the same year: Duchess, a little dog, pays a (none-too-ironical) social visit to Ribby, a little cat, during which she tries to trick her host into serving a dish that Duchess has surreptitiously substituted for Ribby’s. In an uproarious parody of suggestibility, Duchess ends up fooling herself. In *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* (1909), Potter returns to the oscillatory pattern of fantasy and reality of *Two Bad Mice*. Interestingly, *Ginger and Pickles* incorporates an array of “characters” from other stories, including a visit from Lucinda and Jane and their policeman, allowing the reader to welcome old characters as if old friends.

Throughout her adult life, Potter was an avid and sophisticated amateur mycologist. Her particular interest in fungi has been typically seen as a whimsical, droll curiosity of the sort that

befitted the upper class Victorian hobby naturalist. However, Potter herself suggests a different motivation, which has until recently been overlooked (Robinson, 2009). On the day she left for London after a stay in her beloved Sawrey, to which she would eventually return and settle, she wrote the following in what would be one of her last journal entries.

I think one of my pleasantest memories of Esthwaite is sitting on Oatmeal Crag on a Sunday afternoon, where there is sort of a table of rock with a dip, with the lane and fields and oak copse like in a trough below my feet, and all the little tiny fungus people singing and bobbing and dancing in the grass and under the leaves all down below, like the whistling that some people cannot hear of stray mice and bats, and I sitting up above and knowing something about them. I cannot tell what possesses me with the fancy that they laugh and clap their hands especially the little ones that grow in troops and rings amongst dead leaves in the woods. I suppose it is the fairy rings, the myriads of fairy fungi that start into life in the autumn woods. I remember I used to half believe and wholly play with fairies when I was a child. What heaven can be more real than to retain the spirit-world of childhood, tempered and balanced by knowledge and common-sense, to fear no longer the terror that flieth by night, yet to feel truly and understand a little, a very little, of the story of life. (1989b, p. 435)

It is easy to understand why fairy rings (also known as fairy or elf circles), a prominent feature of European and British folklore and a common subject of Victorian literature and painting (Robinson, 2009), were a prominent feature in Potter's childhood fancies: her first nanny, a provincial Scotswoman named Ann McKenzie, filled the hours with upcountry folk tales of stories of the witches and fairies in which she firmly believed, and she taught the young Beatrix to look for toadstools and other evidence of magic in the countryside. Yet, I would argue that Potter's adult engagement with fantasy represents more than a manufactured reenactment of the liberties taken by a child's mind. Instead, it reflects, I would suggest, the persistence

of an inner “spirit world,” in which she still could “half believe and wholly play.” To wit, as long as she kept a journal, Potter addressed entries to her imaginary friend “Esther,” for whom, at the age of twenty-five, she wrote “Memories of Camfield Place.” Two years later, in 1894, she confessed to her journal,

I have thought the whole countryside belonged to the fairies, and that they come out of the woods by moonlight into the fields and on to the dewy grass beside the streams. There are not many hedgehogs, which are fairy beasts, but there are the green sour ringlets where not one ewe bites, and how without the aid of the fairy folk of fosterland could there be so little mildew in the corn? (Potter, 1989b, p. 357)

Forty years hence, in 1933, she admitted to a young friend, “I have been very much interested to read about the beast in Loch Ness...I have always believed in its existence, in spite of the incredulity of the Nat. History Museum” (Potter, 1989a, p. 360).

Science and Literature

Spurred by her curiosity and shaped by the logic of a natural scientist, Potter’s passion for fungi developed into a full-fledged investigative project, complete with kitchen laboratory.¹⁰ As an outsider, she encountered much resistance from the hostile scientific establishment of London, but she persevered, and at the age of thirty wrote a novel scientific paper on her unprecedented success in germinating spores. Her uncle and champion, the distinguished chemist Sir Henry Roscoe, helped her to compose and revise the paper; in Potter’s final journal entry, dated Sunday, January 31st, 1897, she records their progress, noting that “Sir Henry made no further change in the Paper beyond exclaiming at one point with much fervour ‘now this I can *not* understand’” (Potter, 1989b, p. 443). Several months later, her paper was read at the Linnaean Society of London, but not by her: being a woman, Potter was not even allowed to attend the meeting, let alone read her paper. Thus, although the article itself was an important contribution, its

female authorship proved its death knell. Potter withdrew it after learning that the Linnaean Society would not sponsor its publication, its purported mandate to promote the cause of science apparently limited to those advances made by male investigators.¹¹ This denouement marked the end of Potter's attempt to gain scientific recognition, a dream shattered like plaster—as disappointing as the artificial food was to the mice. It also marked the end of her journal writing, a response that speaks volumes: she, who had for many years taken pains to bury her observations and feelings in code, now neglected to record them at all.¹²

Surviving a childhood curtailed by loss and the undeserved rejection by the scientific community, Potter weathered other challenges and crises, including the unexpected and sudden death of her beloved fiancé, Thomas Warne, and her parents' sharp disapproval of a second suitor. She was resilient, and developed other ways to gratify her analytic and expressive strivings. Turning from observing fungi to observing people, she created peerlessly insightful stories about animals in quintessentially human situations, including the rage incurred when hopes and expectations are upended. Further, she ultimately succeeded in realizing a fantasy represented in *Two Bad Mice*: she married, and created a warm home for herself—not in her parents' indifferent mansion in London with its servants and pretensions, but in the Lake District, in a stone farmhouse as snug as Hunca Munca's mouse hole (she may have taken along a few useful items) (Fig. 7). Moreover, she created a farming empire, all while skillfully and scientifically managing the burgeoning commercial enterprise that her children's books had become.

Marked by the disillusionment that is the bitter gift of adulthood, *Two Bad Mice* expresses a longing that all children will eventually entertain: to re-experience, however briefly, the glittering world as the superbly imaginative children they once were, spared the taint of cynicism and the pain of loss. It portends that many of a child's wonderful expectations—dramatized when a child plays "house"—will be dashed on her "dark journey of life." Indeed, the story is something of a corrective, because much of what conventional fairy-tales promise

Figure 7. Beatrix Potter with her favorite collie, Kep, at Hill Top Farm, 1915. Photographer unknown; it may have been her father, Rupert Potter.
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beatrix_Potter_and_Kep_in_1915.jpg

children is “too good to be true.” Still, much that we take from life is “good enough.”

And one of those good things is literature, which takes us on all kinds of journeys, ones we can pick and choose. Indeed, one could venture that *Two Bad Mice* is an educational parable that teaches children about the benefits and wonders of reading and writing literature. After all, a storybook is just like a house: it has a front cover that you open like a door (this one is not fast, either); you open the door, and enter into a different world. The imaginary experience of entering Potter’s nested, progressively fantastical spaces and scenarios—the house, the dollhouse, the mouse hole—mimics the process of entering a story and progressively submerging oneself in its unfolding

fantasy universe, suspending for a short moment the tedious need to disbelieve.

Having been taught a little about literature, and "a little, a very little, of the story of life," Potter's little readers will be reassured to learn that not all is lost: in spite of their "bad" impulses, feelings and fantasies, they are really not "so very very naughty after all."

Dedication

To U.I.H. — *a little girl who still has a dollhouse.*

Notes

1. Rebellious, beautiful and spirited, Jessie Crompton Potter was something of a legend. In 1929, Beatrix Potter bought up tracts of land that had once belonged to the Crompton family and donated them to the National Trust: "I was very much attached to my grandmother Jessie Crompton and said to be very like her, 'only not so good looking!!'" (1989a, p. 322).
2. Potter wrote to Warne, "Hunca Munca is ready to play the game; I stopped her in the act of carrying a doll as large as herself up to the nest, she cannot resist anything with lace or ribbon; (she despises the dishes)...I have had so much pleasure with that box [that Warne made her], I am never tired of watching them run up & down" (1989a, p. 85). Hunca Munca fared less well than her owner, but she at least went down "swinging." In Potter's next report to Warne a year later, she writes "I cannot forgive myself for letting her tumble. I do so miss her. She fell off the chandelier, she managed to stagger up the staircase into your little house, but she died in my hand about 10 minutes after. I think if I had broken my own neck it would have saved a deal of trouble" (p. 122).
3. Although Potter was meticulously discreet about her opinions about others, she made these perceptive observations about two prominent personalities of 1938: "Can you hear Hitler over the wireless as far as America? Did you ever hear such a brutal raving lunatic. I could not understand a word of his clipped rapid German; but the ranting note and the smiling face in the telegraphed photographs are not sane. If Mr. Chamberlain believes in his promises he must be an incurable optimist" (1989a, p. 392).
4. A marketing genius, Potter might not have endorsed the Peter Rabbit dolls, pottery, handkerchiefs, and other items quite so energetically if she had realized that they would only encourage her books to be seen as "toy books—not literature," as she complains in a letter from 1929 (1989a, p. 324).
5. Of note, Jane, the servant cook doll, has the same name as Potter's beloved deceased grandmother, Jane Leech. A staunch Unitarian, she was famous in her time for helping to feed and educate the workers in the mills that created her family's fortune, the workers' families, and those who labored in the other mills and factories in town. Her nourishment extended to her own family: she made the special cookies that Potter enjoyed, and although she did not often visit, she was a warm and loving presence in Potter's life. One wonders whether Potter's designating the Jane doll as a servant cook represents her relative denigrated position in the family—at least from her parents' perspective; alternatively, it may

represent the fact that servants conveyed the great majority of nourishing adult contact in her childhood home.

6. Warne sent the toy food to Potter; she responded, "I received the parcel...the things will all do beautifully; the ham's appearance is enough to cause indigestion...The little dishes are so pretty I am wondering if I have [drawn] enough of them? Shall I squeeze in another dish? I regret the roast duck being left out!" (1989a, p. 88).
7. Potter had no regrets when her ancestral townhouse in Bolton Gardens, London, was destroyed in the Blitz; in fact, she said she was "rather pleased to hear it is no more" (Lear, 2007, p. 421).
8. Another advantage of small formats was small prices; Potter wanted families to be able to afford her books. She also deplored poor standards in the children's book industry: "Children deserve the best...Peter [Rabbit] never aspired to be high art...but if not high art his moderate price has at least enabled him to reach many hundreds of thousands of children, and has given them pleasure without ugliness" (1989a, p. 386).
9. In a letter from 1921, Potter recognizes the crucial importance of her prose style: "I believe my books have succeeded by being absolutely matter of fact" (1989a, p. 272). In 1929, she avers "I believe that is why children learnt by heart my rabbit books; I took trouble with the words" (p. 214). Michael Rustin (1985) observes "While [Potter's] literary method is certainly a narrative one...the subject-matter involves tumultuous feelings, coolly handled. Nor does her writing lack an acute awareness of the properties of language as a complicated bridge between children's and adults' experience of the world—one of the distinctive virtues of her writing is the pleasure it gives to both kinds of reader" (p. 135).
10. For example, in 1938, Potter wrote a friend, "Shingles does go in epidemics in this way—that it so often coincides with chicken pox—too often to be a coincidence" (1989a, p. 393).
11. Sadly, "On the Germination of the Spores of *Agaricineae*" has been lost; that it was not as carefully conserved as Potter's other productions must carry some meaning. She learned her lesson: she was careful to conceal when possible her identity as a woman in subsequent social and agricultural activism (see for example Potter, 1989a, p. 178: "It must not be let out the horse leaflet is written by a *female*. I should give it away as being written by a small farmer in Lancashire.") One hundred years after her paper was presented, the Linnaean Society issued a public apology for its poor treatment of Beatrix Potter (Lear, 2007).
12. This issue is not without controversy. Lear (2007) argues that Potter was content to let her scientific endeavor come to an end. Grinstein (1995) and others share my view that Potter's less than indifferent reception by the scientific community had a greater impact: one who is as passionate about an inquiry for as long as Potter had been does not leave it behind so easily. Her abrupt discontinuation of her journal is perhaps the most convincing evidence of some type of psychic blow.

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