Storytelling, Self, Society, 2(1) (Fall 2005), pp. 1- 20

To Eat or Be Eaten: The Survival of Traditional Storytelling

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One of the great storytellers of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht, once wrote a story about a father who wanted to teach his little son a lesson by placing him on the top of a six-foot wall and commanding him to jump.

"Jump into my arms!" cried the father. "I'll catch you."

"No, no," the son responded. "I'm afraid."

"Jump, I said. There's nothing to fear," the father reassured him.

"No, no! I can't. I won't. You won't catch me," shrieked the shivering child.

"Of course, I'll catch you. What do you think I am, a monster?"

"You promise?" the son sobbed.

"I promise."

So, the boy leapt from the wall. The father took a step back, and the child crashed to the ground in pain.

Brecht told this tale as part of the Herr Keuner series of stories, intended as political parables about survival under capitalist conditions. In a dog-eat-dog world, you can't even trust your father, nor should you. But it is not necessarily capitalism that fosters such a tenuous, if not ruthless relationship between father and son. If we recall, Cronos, the great Greek God, devoured his children and had to be forced to regurgitate them. Abraham was no better. Though he did not eat his sons, he banished Ishmael to the desert and was prepared to kill Isaac to prove his loyalty to God. Some stories even relate that Abraham did indeed kill both Ishmael and Isaac, and other narratives about the origins of the world involve bitter conflicts between a stern authoritarian father, who refuses to have his power and laws questioned, and his children, who are compelled to obey him or face death or banishment. More to the point, folklore is filled with tales of

A shorter version of this paper was delivered as the keynote speech at the conference Tales of Contact and Change, sponsored by the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, on November 11, 2004.

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fathers, giants, ogres, monsters, sorcerers, cannibals, bogeymen, fiends, and devils who eat or beat young children. And men are not the only danger for children. There is also a fair share of mothers, grannies, witches, ogresses, sorceresses, and female demons who lust after children, punish them, and destroy them. Even those allegedly good fairies who have absolute control over children can be wicked. But they generally don't eat their own. Human beings are the ones projected as monsters who eat and destroy their own.

Why?

In her thought-provoking and comprehensive study of horror stories and horrific creatures, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock*, Marina Warner comments:

> The question "Who eats and who gets eaten?" reverberates in the material of bogeydom. How cannibalistic impulses beat in the cultural imagination and what significance they carry can still be heard in the tread of the flesh-eating ogre and his progeny, whether he rattles his bones or strides in seven-league boots or comes whiffling through the tulgey wood. Control of food lies at the heart of the first werewolf story, the transformation of Lycaon, of famous fairy tales, like 'Hansel and Gretel' and less familiar ones that feature ogres and ogresses like Baba Yaga. Vampires and the undead progeny of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), who walk abroad in the shadows of our culture, form part of the larger family of fatal monsters who cannibalize humans. Food—procuring it, preparing it, cooking it, eating it—dominates the material as the overriding image of survival; consuming it offers contradictory metaphors of life and civilization as well as barbarity and extinction (12-13).

Though food—the lust for it and lack of it—may be a dominant motif in folklore, Warner makes clear that there is no one exclusive reason for the unsavory and uncontrollable appetite of adults, often represented metaphorically as monsters, who abuse their power over children. The causes are numerous: famine, starvation, disobedience of the young, fear of losing power, jealousy, sensual pleasure, and so on. Often it is difficult to discover any reason whatsoever. The adult as ogre or witch arbitrarily eats children, lives off children, is obsessed by children, and devouring the young is his or her way of life. The appetite rules.

Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive, or be he dead
I'll grind his bones to make my bread.

But it's not only young Jack, who is often in danger of being devoured by a cannibalistic giant. Tom Thumb and his brothers in Perrault's tale, based on French folklore, are threatened by an ogre, who unintentionally slits the throats of his own daughters, because he thinks they are the boys whom he wants to eat. The witch in "Hansel and Gretel" intends to bake and eat Hansel, and we never know why, unless she is indeed a projection of the stepmother or mother. Even then her reason is murky. She is pure appetite.

We live in a world filled with vampires, demons, aliens, sinister robots run amok, demented scientists, serial killers, and barbaric politicians, indifferent to the murder of innocent children that they cause. No story, however grotesque, should surprise us. We live in a world clouded by hysteria and hypocrisy, in which child abuse and poverty are rampant. We live in a world torn apart by political and religious forces that shred us and make us feel so threatened and desperate that we seek an over-arching narrative to provide us with security. But as we pursue this narrative that has numerous variants—and not everyone seeks an overarching narrative related to intelligent design —I believe we must first recognize that there is a common thread running from ancient times to the very present that underlies many of our tales: we eat our young, and if we don't succeed, we confront them with the question, to be or not to be eaten.

We also nurture our young, but our nurturing is somewhat like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel," who wants to fatten Hansel before she eats him. Do we nurture our young so we can eat them? Is this tradition? Do we nurture and cultivate them to transform them into cannibals and cutthroat barbarians who will eat their young? Do we tell fictional stories and maintain illusory traditions that foster intolerance, ignorance, racism, sexism, and wars? Why should we respect and maintain traditional storytelling, if traditions based on different religions and nationalisms are responsible for much of the misunderstanding and conflict in our world today? Why should we be concerned whether traditional storytelling can survive or whether we are using the appropriate means to transmit customs, mores, and language when they may be anachronistic and deadly for our children and ourselves? Aren't the religious narratives of every living religion today, intended to be taken as the gospel truth, somewhat responsible in their literalistic and fundamentalist interpretations for crimes against children and humanity? How do we find truth in untruthful tales and believe

traditional storytellers—priests, ministers, rabbis, tribal leaders, shamen, imams, gurus, and so on—who often blur our view of the world to rationalize their own power?

The only way we can do justice to traditional tales and storytelling, in my opinion, is to problematize the value of these tales and to question the purpose of tradition and the role of the storyteller. Not all traditional tales are religious and demand belief in and obedience to the strictures of the tale. Not all traditional storytellers are holy people who call for blind faith in the putative truths of their tales. There are hundreds of types of traditional tales, and many diverse traditional ways of telling tales. They will continue to exist and to be transmitted. So we must ask these questions about traditional tales and their survival: what are the traditional tales that reoccur and are repeated in traditional storytelling and why? Is it realistically possible to convey a sense of the past about one's culture to people in the present through traditional storytelling? How is it possible to tell a tale from another culture through traditional storytelling? Is it worth the effort to use storytelling to bring about greater intercultural understanding? If a great deal of traditional storytelling pertains to the question "to be or not to be eaten," how can we use the same storytelling to feed listeners and tellers alike so that they will not have to fear abuse, abandonment, and betrayal?

The Traditional Canon of Tales

Clearly, the tales that become canonical in a society are those that have generally been fostered by religious ritual, practical custom, and social communication. What we call canon formation began in the fourth century A.D. when, as John Guillory explains, the word *canon*

> was used to signify a list of texts or authors, specifically the books of the Bible and of the early theologians of Christianity. In this context 'canon' suggested to its users a principle of selection by which some authors or texts were deemed worthier of preservation than others (233).

The formation of canons was primarily developed through modes of orality and the writings of early religious and education establishments until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. At that point it became important in Western civilization to set standards of literacy through published works, schools, and churches that fostered the memorization and rote learning of religious and didactic stories, national legends, and codes. R. A. Houston points out that:

> the early modern period saw much greater intervention by governments in the interests of regulation,

> systematization and even provision. During the sixteenth century the principal drive to control, extend and structure the provision of education came from a desire for religious conformity whether in the bounds of a nation state or within a principality or even a single town (43).[1]

Of course, it was very difficult to control the diverse modes of storytelling. Competing canons of stories arose, and it is difficult to trace or even insist that there is a definitive canon of storytelling in any one society or nation. What is written down as traditional is always challenged by the spoken word and daily practice. Nevertheless, religions and nation states have derived their authority and power from traditional canons of literature and storytelling. The Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist religions and others have made their mark in the world and organized manifold forms of storytelling so that their belief systems are spread not only from the pulpit but through the mass media and through people themselves—through word of mouth abetted by print. Political leaders and states have also fostered stories about their histories, heroes, events, and incidents that have helped to construct a sense of community or nation. Schools and universities are sites where canonical tales and traditions are evaluated and debated. History as we know is not only written by the victors, but also told by them and spread by victorious peoples from all walks of life. What becomes traditional and canonical is also relevant for survival and the maintenance of identity and community determined by dominant social groups in what Norbert Elias has called the "civilizing process."[2]

Most important for traditions of storytelling and canon formation is the interaction between literacy and orality as mediated through education systems. Guillory remarks that:

> the fact that in our time the teaching of how to read and write, and the teaching of how to interpret literary works, are divided between the lower and the higher levels of the educational system has perhaps blinded us to the real historical motives of canon formation, and to the relations among literature, language, and the social structure. Most important, we have yet to acknowledge or explain fully the relation between literature and society, a relation mediated by the school, as the institution of linguistic control. Literature and language have marched through history in tandem with one another, and yesterday's literature has become today's grammar. The language of societies with written

> literatures has thus tended to become internally stratified according to which groups among the population have access to the school, and how much access each has (242).

Yet not all the tales that become canonical through the processes of oral and literary traditions reinforce the dominant groups of a particular society. Indeed, there are thousands if not millions of tales that people tell time and again, such as many of Aesop's fables, or fables similar to those he allegedly told, that bring people together and expose the contradictions of the powerful and suggest ways in which the oppressed can survive. One can perhaps talk about counter-canonical traditions or modes of storytelling. That is, tradition always engenders subversion. For instance, many legends question the authoritarianism of authority figures. Robin Hood takes from the rich and gives to the poor and tries to pave the way for a just ruler in England. Barbarossa will rise from the dead to revive the fortunes of Germany. Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary peasant, is celebrated as a hero in numerous Mexican legends. Canonical tales are not static and stable; their many transformations are worth studying because they reflect changing values, morals, and politics in a given society. Here we must keep in mind that there are multiple canons throughout the world that are shared and contested among multiple groups and social forces. The stories themselves are resilient precisely because they open themselves to multiple layers of identification and interpretation. Not everyone is exposed to canonized storytelling or canonical tales.

Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that, to become literate today, to function as a world citizen and attain power in a constantly changing civilizing process, an individual must know how to read and write and be able to reference standard traditional stories to prove his or her membership in a particular community. It is not necessary for an individual to believe in a traditional story that has become canonized. In our day and age, when it is almost impossible to avoid the mass media, we tend to be exposed to homogenized traditional stories, and canonical tales tend to condition our thinking even in the form of lies. The canonical tale brings about a proclivity to listen to a particular story time and again so that a certain tradition will be reinforced. The tale becomes registered by and in our brains almost by osmosis. Once registered by the brain, tales have a memetic function. Richard Dawkins, the renowned biologist, has argued that there may be memes in our brains that are replicators and function somewhat like genes.

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building

> arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (192).[3]

Though the theory of memetics is controversial,[4] one thing is clear: a culture of a particular group is established linguistically through narrative exchanges, repetition, imitation, and socialization. These exchanges enact and embody the belief systems that hold people together. As a group of people survives in a particular region, they continually cultivate their own relevant customs through different modes of storytelling to stabilize their lives and to transmit their values to the young so the belief system will continue. Whoever controls the transmission, that is, the mediations of established values, mores, and customs, will have a powerful influence on the substance of thought and the manner in which people view their lives. Traditional storytelling that becomes canonized is thus essentially conservative and tends to conserve the interests of the status quo, but the canon cannot exclude counter-traditional tales, for it cannot totally govern word of mouth. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency in Western societies, as represented by states, churches, governments, schools, and corporations, is to place words in our mouths through all sorts of technological means, so that we will repeat, memorize and, through conditioning imitate. Instead of gaining a sense of tradition through personal experience and experimentation, we are to learn, often by rote, what our traditions are and how we can come to know ourselves through mass-mediated and manipulated stories. We are also—at least in America—expected to uproot ourselves, become mobile, adaptable, and replaceable, like the spare parts of a machine set up to operate automatically.

Even traditions are calculated, configured, and streamlined to become automatic, that is, official traditions intended to celebrate nation-states, religions, and local customs and to keep them functioning. Paradoxically, they are set up to remain stable and eternal, while people are conditioned to become flexible and expendable to serve the needs of the advanced capitalist economic system now called globalization. To become world citizens or even citizens of our own nation-states, it is necessary to abandon our particular identities while paying respects to automatic traditions wherever we may be placed. Paradoxically we are expected to be multicultural as languages and cultures are gradually

being eliminated throughout the world. We are expected to hold ourselves together and to be held together through artificial theme parks that make fakelore out of folklore; through churches, synagogues, and mosques as entertainment centers; through schools that foster rote learning and positivist testing; through storytellers who espouse the value of traditional tales without critically examining what tales they are telling and why; through television programs that promote history and news as spectacle; and through political speeches that use false patriotic appeals to tradition so that the young will sacrifice their minds and bodies for their alleged native country, as though national identity were essential and innate.

How can we know traditions, gain a sense of traditions, when they have become elusive and are employed in the interests of groups that pretend to speak for us when they are speaking at us and not enabling the young to speak for themselves? Why are we so intent on baking and eating our young or beating traditions into them?

The Problematic Role of the Cultural Transmission of Tradition

On September 12, 2004, I was driving my car and listening, as is my wont, to National Public Radio, and by chance, I happened to tune into the program "Speaking of Faith," and though I am not religious and avoid programs with ponderous sermons and weighty deliberations about church issues and God, I was immediately drawn to an ongoing discussion about the story of Abraham. The moderator, Krista Tippett, was interviewing Bruce Feiler, who had written a book titled *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, and was presenting background material about Abraham and why he was impelled to write his book after September 11, 2001. Indeed, Feiler, a journalist, who had witnessed the collapse of the twin towers in New York, had begun research in hopes of understanding Abraham's legacy as the common father of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He wanted to grasp the story of Abraham in a more profound way, and in particular, he sought to depict Abraham as a unifying symbol in troubled times. Although I had come to know Abraham in my youth as the father of the Jews, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove his loyalty to God, I was not conversant with Abraham's role in the Muslim and Christian religions, nor did I know that there were thousands if not millions of competing stories about Abraham that have been passed down through word of mouth and print throughout the world over centuries. The more I listened, the more I became intrigued not only by the role that Abraham played in founding all three religions, but by Feiler's glowingly positive interpretation of Abraham in contrast to Søren Kierkegaard's much more critical and philosophical exposition of the tale in *Fear and Trembling*.[5]

Interestingly, both Kierkegaard and Feiler make a leap of faith and

assume that what is pure story may be true and should affect our reality, the way we think and pass on stories. Yet, according to Feiler, there is no archeological evidence that Abraham ever existed, and in the stories that were created, Abraham was a man of violence who willingly sacrificed his two sons or was ready to sacrifice his two sons in the name of God or because he heard the voice of God demanding that he do this. Who created the stories and how they were spread until they were written down in the Old Testament and the Koran remains a mystery. We only know that they emerged from an oral tradition, from the imagination of storytellers, and that the various tales gathered momentum until they attained something like gospel truth and have been passed on as gospel truth ever since they assumed their written form in the Bible and the Koran. Yet, even in so-called definitive form, they are not fixed stories, for there have been many variants and apocryphal stories printed about Abraham, and who knows how many millions of oral versions told by common people. How, I asked myself, was a man, who subscribed to infanticide and may never have even existed, become an exemplary if not the exemplary figure in three different world religions?

As I was listening to Feiler, I felt almost as if this program had been "purposely" sent to me, that I was not listening to it by chance, for I had already been taking notes on a talk about traditional storytelling that I was to give at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in the beginning of November 2004. I also knew that I was going to focus on the connection between tradition and infanticide. But even more important, I was puzzled by Feiler's almost indifferent attitude toward the element of child abuse. How could he praise and treat Abraham with so much reverence and offer him as a symbol of unity and, even worse, of humanity?

When the program ended, I realized that it represented an unusually poignant example of problems involved in the cultural transmission of tradition today. It demonstrated vividly how tradition represses (or inadvertently reveals) how we bake and eat our children, or if we keep them alive, how we beat stories into them that will make them willing subjects of forces to whom they grant control over their destinies. No matter how one interprets the story, there are some fundamental threads that hold it together, and they are all tied to patriarchal notions: that there is a male god, that believers in this god are bound to obey his every word, and that they must be ready to kill their own sons and daughters in his name. Over the centuries, these notions have been used in a myriad of ways, somewhat like memes, to rationalize thousands of wars, and all the murders and deaths that have resulted from these conflicts stem from people's belief in these traditional stories that have no verifiable foundation. Such is the power of storytelling, or rather, such is the power of traditional storytelling.

Neither Feiler nor his moderator Krista Tippett were prepared to discuss this disturbing element of the Abraham tradition, and to make sure that I heard correctly, I went to the Internet a couple of days later to read the transcript of the program. To my surprise, I discovered that Feiler had also been interviewed earlier by Neil Conan in 2002 on "Talk of the Nation," another Public Radio program. Fortunately I was able to read the transcript of this program as well, and I came across an exchange that struck me as highly significant. Conan opened the line for callers, and the very first one was Mimi from Van Nuys, California, who said:

> I do think that Abraham unifies all three religions and in a very timely way in that he thought God demanded the sacrifice of his son in order for him to prove his love and loyalty to God above all else. And he did not have to sacrifice his son, and I think that we should remember all three religions need to outgrow this idea that they need to shed blood and sacrifice their sons and daughters in order to prove their loyalty to their god, the god that they imagine is asking this.
>
> Conan: Hmmm.
>
> Feiler: What's interesting about this is this story of the sacrifice, which everybody remembers from when they were a child—you think that the story would be so barbaric that it would have died out over time. Instead, this story is read in the holiest week of the Jewish year, at Rosh Hashana. It's read in the holiest week of the Christian year, at Easter. It's read in the holiest week—the same story—the holiest week in the Muslim year, at the end of the pilgrimage. And I think it's that question we hope never to ask: Would I kill for God? And as we all. . . .
>
> Mimi: And the answer should be no. I think Sarah, the mother, might have had a different answer. And a wonderful psychologist named Alice Miller wrote in a book that in looking for a painting to put on the cover of the book about child abuse, she could not find one in which Abraham was looking at his child. He was always looking up to sacrifice and kill. And she said, "If he looked in the eyes of his child, he would have seen the answer: 'Why are you doing this? Please don't kill me.'"
>
> Feiler: It's interesting. As you may know, Abraham is on the cover of *Time* magazine this week because of this topical issue we're discussing. And they

> lay out all of these portraits of Abraham over the generations, and by far and away, the action from Abraham's life that's most frequently depicted in the history of art is this sacrifice.
>
> Mimi: Well, let us look to our children's eyes for God from now on, instead of to the skies where we imagine he is. And that's my comment. Thank you.

It is obvious from this conversation that both Feiler and Conan either did not want to engage Mimi in a discussion about child abuse, or that they did not want to reflect on how the Abraham tales further human sacrifice for an imaginary god, bloodshed, and war. They were bent on seeing Abraham as a kind of unifier, whereas Mimi was asking why we should pay homage to a child abuser and an imaginary deity. She referenced Alice Miller's book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, which is perhaps one of the most significant psychological studies in the twentieth century about the power relations between adults and children and how adults are disposed to use their power to control if not warp the lives of children. Whereas Mimi wanted to challenge and open the frame in which Feiler and Conan discussed the tradition of Abraham, they quickly and blithely closed it to conceal some bitter truths. The *modus operandi* in the mass media, the public sphere, and most of our institutions will only tolerate benign questioning of established traditions. We insist on conserving and building on traditional narratives as though our canons were sacred.

The Utopian Value of the Reutilization of Tradition

If we accept the premise that tradition feeds off the young to maintain itself and will do anything including the sacrifice of the young to preserve itself, storytellers who have a deep stake in preserving their different traditions are in a quandary, especially since there are currents and counter-currents of tradition that foster the autonomy of young and old alike as well as tolerance and respect for difference. Perhaps *quandary* is the wrong word. Perhaps we must discuss the choices and responsibilities of storytellers and how traditions can be "reutilized" to reconstitute a deeper awareness of their meanings and their impact on our lives.

In his thought-provoking book *The Past in Ruins*, David Gross argues that the "otherness" of tradition could be used more effectively for a radical critique of present-day capitalism in all its postmodern and post-industrialist forms. What is necessary is a critical appropriation of tradition, and here he relies on a key idea of *Umfunktionalisierung* (reutilization or re-functioning) developed by the German writers and

intellectuals Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin during the 1920s in their critique of fascism. Gross defines reutilization as:

> extracting and rearranging elements from within the capitalist system in order to set them against capitalism itself, a process Bloch referred to as salvaging 'that which is true in false consciousness.'" Then Gross adds, "as it turned out, however, the real masters of the art of refunctioning were not Weimar's left-wing intellectuals but the modern state and the modern economy. And the greatest successes of refunctioning have not been those that subverted bourgeois values, but those that transformed many of the old traditions, forcing them to serve ends for which they were not initially intended (108).

According to Gross, there were at least two types of refunctioning or reutilizing: the first kind takes charge of a certain current of tradition and maintains it by appending new meanings; the second kind takes possession of an entire tradition and imbues it with new layers of signification and social tasks. However what is one to do, Gross asks, when the radical concept and practice of reutilization are instrumentalized by the market and state to create a false sense of harmony and/or to manipulate desire by using new inventions and technology to maintain old power structures and traditional hierarchies? His answer is: we must employ a "subversive genealogy" that would address the exploitative refunctioning of tradition:

> first, by analyzing what is closest at hand—i.e., the instrumentalized and commodified traditions that surround us—and would then move backward in time in order to chart their origin and development. It would do this by breaking down contemporary refunctionings into their parts, showing what role each part now plays and what new meanings have been assigned to each artificially sustained tradition. This amounts to the synchronic first step of a subversive geneaology. But second, this kind of genealogy would need to shift into a diachronic dimension by tracing each reworked facet of a tradition back in time in order to locate the point where an apparently authentic tradition, or part of one, become inauthentic: the point, that is, where it began to be pulled from its context and refunctioned politically or economically (117).

The practice of subversive genealogy is not to recuperate traditions that have been marginalized, suppressed, or occluded. The purpose is rather to "reconsider what might be called the refuse of the dialectic, not in order to increase social cohesion or promote a *resitutio in integrum*, but in order to acquire a vantage point on modernity based in what modernity has banished or repressed" (135). A critique of tradition is therefore valuable only if it creates a new sense of tradition by revealing how fruitless it is to reclaim or recuperate tradition. By seeing tradition as "the Other," we gain a sense of what was unfulfilled and still needs to be fulfilled.

Certainly, Gross's critique of how the authority of tradition is maintained is valid, but he tends to view the problems of the transmission of tradition too much from the viewpoint of the manipulators. Instead, we must ask what role did and do the majority of people or the *Volk* play? And I do not mean folk in the romantic and nostalgic sense of the word as those rural people close to nature and living in a non-commodified community. I mean the majority of people in different societies who define themselves through communal associations and cultural references whether they interact in groups of long or short duration. Gross is apparently so concerned about how traditions are viewed and manipulated from above that his major concern is with the exposure of such manipulation and the development of theoretical analysis that has little basis in history. Unfortunately, he does not seek to understand how people of different classes and creeds come together to create customs, art forms, and social codes to give themselves a sense of identity and cohesion. What good is critical appropriation if it does not enable people to sustain their life worlds and give their endeavors some sense of meaning through story or history? Or, put another way, how have people from different classes and creeds been using their traditions? In light of the instrumentalization of their traditions by religions, schools, and market forces, how have they made use of all kinds of traditional tales to endow their existence on this planet with meaning?

To begin to answer these questions even partially, it is helpful to return to Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin, because they raised the question of *Umfunktionierung* not as an intellectual puzzle, but to address political and cultural practice during the 1920s and 1930s. That is, each one of these writers was concerned that the *Volk* might become *völkisch*, that the people might become popularist in a reactionary sense. Indeed, their traditions were being filled by Nazi reutilized myths. These corresponded to an aesthetization of politics and culture that concealed manipulation (today we might use the term *social construct* and discuss how culture is socially constructed and controlled). For Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin, the reutilization of tradition through theater and storytelling

was to be a political practice that would use montage and discontinuity to alienate audiences so that they could gain distance from their situation, think, deliberate, and decide for themselves what they wanted to do with their lives. Bloch wrote about this political reutilization in various essays during the 1920s and later in *Heritage of Our Times* (1934)[6]; Benjamin presented his views about this in his famous essay "The Storyteller" and in other essays on Brecht and epic theater in the 1930s[7]; Brecht practiced reutilization through his epic theater and *Verfremdungseffekt* during the 1930s and until his death in 1956. The utopian *telos* of reutilization as practice was to foster deeper understanding of contradictions in tradition through open-ended stories and plays that audiences (namely the people) were encouraged to resolve. Such resolution necessitates cohesion, coming together, forming an identity through interests that could be maintained and continually transformed. In this way tradition would be constantly re-created through critical appropriation.

It is not by chance that Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin were attracted to folklore, that is folk tales, fairy tales, and popular culture. If "authentic" culture was to be passed on, to be *tradiert*, then it was best done through trading and exchanging stories, for the best of storytellers took their material from the life experiences of the people. They returned this material to the people to keep alive a certain hope that powerless folk could overcome obstacles, determine their own destinies, outwit giants, and prevent ogres and witches from eating them. The listeners of these tales reshaped them, responded, made changes, and interacted with the tellers in a way that enabled them to share in the production of the tales.

Benjamin tended to glorify the so-called "true" storyteller, and Bloch idealized fairy tales, arguing that they shed light on the potential of humankind to form democratically determined societies or concrete utopias that could be gleaned from the indestructible vestiges of surplus value of tradition. Though Bloch and Benjamin (not so much Brecht) idealized the function of storytelling, they nevertheless addressed the question of nurturing and cultivating "authentic" tradition or tradition appropriate to the material needs of the people in ways other intellectuals of their day did not. And they did this to demonstrate a very common way that people were actually trying to resist or could resist the inauthentic manipulation and exploitation exemplified by the Nazis' expropriation of tradition. Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin were concerned with developing strategies that the people (the *Volk*) could use to maintain their autonomy, and they tried to show how the Nazis were appropriating terms of folk traditions and creating their own false traditional symbols and narratives. To tell tales was to govern and navigate tradition, and Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin were determined in

the 1930s to underscore the cultural necessity of telling tales to deflate the myths of Nazism and to reutilize tradition to grasp historical manipulation. Of course, there was no "free" storytelling under the Nazis, but the clandestine telling of tales was a way in which resistance was formed and traditions maintained by different groups of people in Germany and throughout Europe during fascism.

Although some people would maintain that fascism has resurfaced in different forms in America and other parts of the world, we are not living in a totalitarian society. As long as we have freedom of speech in the public sphere, storytelling can play a vital role to enable us to grasp the positive and negative values of traditions. Ever since the 1970s in America, professional storytellers and storytellers who represent ethnic minorities and counter-hegemonic movements such as feminism have realized more than ever before that there is something amiss in the way traditions and traditional stories are being passed down through the generations, and that many traditions are missing or endangered. This awareness of a lack of preservation of traditions and a distorted manner of using traditional tales have led to a resurgence of storytelling not only throughout the US but also in the UK and western Europe. Nevertheless, too often there is a sacred regard for traditional folktales, as if they were authentic remnants from the past that must be treated in a reverent manner—an attitude that one can also find among anthropologists, ethnologists, and folklorists, who collect and write about traditional customs and tales. Certainly, the tales deserve to be documented, treated with care, and preserved so we can know more about the history of different groups. But there is no way that we can "authentically" pass them on to future generations, and there is no reason why we should choose to tell tales just for the sake of these traditions, which, as I have stressed, often involve *the eating of children* or other forms of individual or communal madness. Indeed, much of tradition is often romanticized in compelling tales that are twisted into chauvinistic, biased, sexist, and racist tales that storytellers may present as tradition for tradition's sake. In 1993, Roger D. Abrahams called upon folklorists to shake off the phantoms of romantic nationalism and address the complex process in which tradition is simultaneously preserved and changed in new communal forms:

> Rather than regarding vernacular languages and procedures as systems in place, our altered view regards communication of any sort as an accomplishment carried out in common by members of a speech community, a performance community, an interpretive community. But clearly we must bring such ideas of community into line with the ways in which

> increasingly voluntaristic and plural societies are organizing themselves experientially and practically. It has been clear in the West for some time that forms of popular culture organized around high-intensity experiences (such as festivals or marches) and around stylized and technique-driven activities (such as dancing, sky-diving, camping, sports spectating, or collecting of any sort) create the possibilities for communities that seldom meet face-to-face. Moreover, we must not regard instant communities as simple outgrowths of the pop-culture industries, for their developed vernacular forms often contain elements that are, in fact, resistant to the mechanical reproduction techniques that originally brought them into being. Processes such as customization and the construction of the pastiche makes this self-evident (29-30).

Whereas many folklorists and storytellers have tended to glorify the past in ruins in their work until the 1970s, there has also been a more recent and also strong tendency to reflect critically upon the past, as the "lore" they recover is being used to mark out a future that can lead to a new sense of community. No matter what position we take with regard to tradition, it is clear that the past can devour us, as we devour our children, if our position is not critical and transformative.

Transforming Tradition

The great writers and storytellers have always been transformers and translators. One could perhaps argue they never had a choice because there is no such thing as an original or authentic tale. They all have had to build on the past, on tradition, on stories handed down over the ages. They have had to translate from different tongues to facilitate understanding and create meaning. But what distinguishes the great writers and storytellers is that they write and tell with a conscious effort to grab hold of tradition as if it were a piece of clay and to mold it and remold it to see what they can make out of it for the present. They don't view tradition as iron-clad, static and settled, but as supple and changeable. Nothing is inanimate in their hands and mouths. They are animators, breathing life into all things and all beings. They don't worship the past and tradition, but demand that the past and tradition justify themselves in the present. In turn, they ask that their remolding of the past and tradition be questioned.

It is the emotional and critical engagement with traditional tales that determines the quality of the contemporary storyteller's work as animator and transformer. Whether it is in a performance or pedagogical

mode in front of a large audience, in families and tribes, or in intimate settings with children and adults in institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, old age homes, and so on, the storyteller must reveal that he or she is engaged in the preservation of tradition while standing outside it and transforming it from a personal and ideological viewpoint. The storyteller is never the tradition, never represents authentic tradition. The storyteller is an actor, an agent, a translator, an animator, and as I have argued elsewhere, a thief who robs treasures to give something substantive to the poor.[8]

Most of all, the storyteller interested in the past and in preserving tradition must be curious and follow hints that interest him or her. In his brilliant book *The Beast in the Nursery*, the British psychologist Adam Phillips remarks:

> If curiosity, and what I am calling interest, is always in the service of the new, of the old renewed, then it is always revisionary, making futures out of the past, turning orders into hints and following them up, these orders being both the instructions involved in growing up and their source in the available traditions and canons the culture provides (113).

The difficulty in our society and in most societies in the world is that tradition is used to combat curiosity and to deaden it, just as children's curiosity must be tamed, if not deadened, if they are to be acculturated. Clearly, children have something to do with the unconscious wishes and urges that were never fulfilled or realized by adults and therefore need to be repressed as potential threats to adults. It is perhaps not so much food, then, but children's curiosity that gives rise to stories in which children are eaten or devastated. These tales about bogeymen, monsters, and ogres expose the contradictions of patriarchal rule and both reinforce and subvert tradition at the same time, for they alert children to what they must do if they don't want to be eaten, and they also warn them what to expect and how they might subvert prescriptive and arbitrary rule.

The only way that children (and adults) can be reared into tradition with stories that do not involve scaring them and encouraging them to submit to monsters and arbitrary deities is by transforming our notion of children, childhood, and curiosity, and understanding more sensitively if not sensibly the conflictual nature of civilization and its discontents. Phillips notes that:

> it is a paradox of some interest that nurture always involves compliance; the child must submit to the fact

> that some things are too hot to touch, that the parents have a history, and so on. But joining the group is not solely a matter of forced agreements; the child, like the psychoanalyst, also undoes and recombines the connections the culture wants her to make (you handle it because it's too hot to handle). So the ideal of adaptation is always matched—at least in posttraditional societies —by the ideal of improvisation: the child and the adult's relative freedom to transform, according to their unconscious desire, the cultural givens. This often involves changing the rules (the importance of one thing replaces the importance of another, and those who like the new thing call it progress). So there is what might be called a commonsense struggle for survival, and a struggle for the survival of imaginative vision (116).

How we foster a tale-telling tradition that does not involve devouring children is not a question to be taken lightly, for it concerns the transformation of child-rearing practices, education, and the treatment of our young. It involves the preservation of the imaginative vision. If we do not question and undo dominant traditional storytelling, we not only risk losing the imaginative vision, but we also place our children at risk (as we already have). Their survival depends on our continual engagement with cultural traditions—opening them up, and opening ourselves in the process.

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Notes

[1] See also Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[2] See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen, 1978) and Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell, eds., *The Norbert Elias Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1998).

[3] See also Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think* (New York: The Free press, 2002).

[4] For diverse opinions, see the essays in Robert Aunger, ed. *Dawinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[5] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2003) with an interesting introduction by Hannay.

[6] See Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, Trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990) and *Literary Essays*, Trans. Andrew Joron and Others (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1998).

[7] See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

[8] See "How Storytellers Can Change Education in Changing Times: Stealing from the Rich to Build Community Bridges" in Jack Zipes, *Speaking Out: Storytelling and Creative Drama for Children* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35-59.