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The Cultural Evolution of Storytelling and Fairy Tales: Human Communication and Memetics

Even the simplest and most static of human cultures is an engine of inventive mutual influence and change. Furthermore, at least orally, human cultures preserve *historical* record, imaginative or real, couched in a human language. The past pervades human consciousness to some degree even in the simplest societies, and discussions of past events—narrating, sometimes dramatically, commenting on the narration, challenging points of fact or logic, and co-constructing a suite of stories—occupied many an evening for perhaps 300,000 years, but not for millions of years before that. And while our ancestors were arguing, many ape communities not far away in the forest were making their—yes, traditional—nests and drifting off to sleep. The only modern apes that have learned language learned it from human teachers, and none of their wild counterparts has anything like it. Even if their individual minds preserve some private history, it is difficult to see how they could have a collective one without being able to tell it to each other and to their young. All human cultures can, do, and probably must.

—Melvin Konner, *The Evolution of Childhood* (2010)

Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate. The breath imputed by this book's title is the breath of a god in creation stories, as that god gives life to the lump that will become human. Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided. What is it about stories—what are their particularities—that enables them to work as they do? More than mere curiosity is at stake in this question, because human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories

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impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose

—Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe* (2010)

Though it is impossible to trace the historical origins and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time and place, we do know that humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech. They may have even used sign language before speech originated to communicate vital information for adapting to their environment.¹ Units of this information gradually formed the basis of narratives that enabled humans to learn about themselves and the worlds that they inhabited. Informative tales were not given titles. They were simply told to mark an occasion, set an example, warn about danger, procure food, or explain what seemed inexplicable. People told stories to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts.

Though many ancient tales might seem magical, miraculous, fanciful, superstitious, or unreal to us, people believed them, and these people were and are not much different from people today who believe in religions, miracles, cults, nations, and notions such as “free” democracies that have little basis in reality. In fact, religious and patriotic stories have more in common with fairy tales than we realize, except that fairy tales tend to be secular and are not based on a prescriptive belief system or religious codes. Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world. Therefore, the focus of fairy tales, whether oral, written, or cinematic, has always been on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment, making it more suitable for living in peace and contentment. Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict. We are all misfit for the world, and somehow we must fit in, fit in with other people, and thus we must invent or find the means through communication to satisfy as well as resolve conflicting desires and instincts.

Fairy tales are rooted in oral traditions and, as I mentioned above, were never given titles, nor did they exist in the forms in which they are told, printed, painted, recorded, performed, filmed, and manufactured today. Folklorists generally make a distinction between wonder folk tales, which originated in oral traditions throughout the world and still exist, and literary fairy tales, which emanated from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print, and continue to be created today in various

mediated forms around the world. In both the oral and literary traditions, the tale types influenced by cultural patterns are so numerous and diverse that it is almost impossible to define a wonder folk or fairy tale, or explain the relationship between the two modes of communication. There are helpful catalogs of tale types along with encyclopedias of fairy tales such as Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* (1928), revised by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004, my *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (2000), William Hansen's *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (2002), Donald Haase's *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2007), and the worthwhile ongoing project *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, begun in 1958 and still not finished. Yet despite the value of these books, the intricate relationship and evolution of folk and fairy tales are difficult to comprehend and define. In fact, together, oral and literary tales form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another.

It is for this reason that I use the modern term "fairy tale" in this book to encompass the oral tradition as the genre's vital progenitor and try to explain the inexplicable fairy tale, including its evolution and dissemination. In other words, my use of the term fairy tale here refers to the symbiotic relationship of oral and literary currents, even if I occasionally make historical distinctions concerning the mediation and reception of different tale types. In focusing on the interaction between various mediations of the fairy tale, I want to refute the useless dichotomies such as print versus oral that some scholars are still promoting to paint a misinformed history of the fairy tale.² I also want to explore the more sophisticated and innovative theories of storytelling, cultural evolution, human communication, and memetics to see how they might enable us to understand why we are disposed toward fairy tales, and how they breathe life into our daily undertakings.

In his most recent book, *Letting Stories Breathe*, Frank notes that stories embody capacities we need to consider in order to articulate and discuss problematic issues in our lives. Frank maintains that he does not want to interpret stories. Rather, he uses several different types of narratives to explain the claims and operating premises of socio-narratology. He is not interested in interpreting stories because critics tend to use heuristics and critical methodologies to foreclose the meanings of stories. Frank wants to analyze how stories work by focusing on how they are in dialogue with one another, people's experiences, and societies.³ The source for Frank's ideas on dialogic narratology is the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who elaborated principles of dialogic philosophy in his many works.⁴ Key for Frank is the notion that all utterances are essentially dialogic because they depend on the interplay of varied, and at times opposed, meanings. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that all language usage is a product of conflicting social forces that engender constant reinterpretation.

Given the dialogic nature of language and how we use it to form narratives that inform us, Frank's basic premises are these:

1. Stories do not belong to storytellers and story listeners because all stories are “reassemblies of fragments on loan” and “depend on shared narrative sources.”⁵
2. Stories not only contribute to the making of our narrative selves but also weave the threads of social relationships and make life social.
3. Stories have certain distinct capacities that enable them to do what they do best and can be understood as narrative types or genres. Though distinct, genres of stories depend on one another, for there is no such thing as a pure genre, and all tale types have a symbiotic relationship to one another.
4. Socio-narratology encourages a dialogic mode of interpretation so that all voices can be heard, and open up a story for various interpretations and possible uses.
5. “Socio-narratology, although always relational in recognizing that all parties act, pays most attention to stories acting. It analyzes how stories breathe as they animate, assemble, entertain, and enlighten, and also deceive and divide people.”⁶
6. Analysis demands that we learn from storytellers. “The primary lesson from storytellers is that they learn to work with stories that are not *theirs* but *there*, as realities. Master storytellers know that stories breathe.”⁷

Among the stories that breathe, fairy tales are unique but not independent, just as most genres are unique in some way but are interdependent. To understand the uniqueness and impact of fairy tales on our lives, we need first to discuss the origins of language and its evolution, for once a plethora of stories began to circulate in societies throughout the world, they contained the seeds of fairy tales, ironically tales at first *without* fairies formed by metaphor and metamorphosis and by a human disposition to communicate relevant experiences. These primary tales enabled humans to invent and reinvent their lives—and create and re-create gods, divine powers, fairies, demons, fates, monsters, witches, and other supernatural characters and forces. An *other world* is very much alive in fairy tales, thanks to our capacity as storytellers.

Human Communication and the Origins of Fairy Tales and Other Genres

It is impossible to locate and study the history of stories and the evolution of genres because people began speaking and told stories thousands of years before they learned to read, write, and keep records. And even when they learned how to write, only a tiny minority of humans was capable of reading

and writing, and these elite groups were preoccupied with their own interests, which had little bearing on the general or popular modes of communication. Nevertheless, there are certain grounded assumptions that we can make about the evolution of communication and storytelling as well as the origins of fairy tales. It is also possible to demonstrate how all stories are linked to one another, yet distinct in their personal and social functions.

In his recent, significant study, *A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet*, Marshall Poe maintains that the media, communicative networks, and culture have their own type-specific attributes that are related to each other. If we regard a medium as a tool for sending, receiving, storing, and retrieving information, there are eight media attributes that we must consider if we are to understand the evolution of speech as a medium of communication up to the Internet's invention: accessibility, privacy, fidelity, volume, velocity, range, persistence, and search ability. Poe divides the history of communication into six historical phases that began about three hundred thousand years ago: speech, manuscript, print, audiovisual, Internet, and digital. Throughout the development of communication in the course of these approximately three hundred thousand years, speech was and has remained the primary constant up to the present day. Communication developed in the first place, according to Poe, because we talk to be relevant. "Evolutionarily speaking, we talk because we were the only primates who gained social status and therewith fitness by talking. . . . Psychologically speaking, we talk because we must be heard."⁸

Building on the theory of Jean-Louis Desalles in *Why We Talk: The Evolutionary Origins of Language*, Poe points out that different social practices dependent on speech and human communication emerged, and that these social practices gave rise, and still do, to commensurate values. He argues that "the formation of allies and coalitions that cooperated with one another to live in groups that became societies was dependent on communication. Proto-humans had to look for a characteristic in allies that would be mutually beneficial. Desalles proposes that this criterion was relevance. Relevance here means utterances that will profit a listener and thereby recommend the speaker as an ally." Poe goes on to assert that "speech is not so much a form of cooperation as a contest between speakers for the approbation of listeners."⁹

Of course, speech has many other functions, but the point about relevance is significant, because almost all storytellers strive to make themselves and their stories relevant, and if they succeed, those stories will stick in the minds of their listeners, who may tell these stories later and contribute to the replication of stories that form cultural patterns.¹⁰ Telling stories—that is, command of the word—was vital if one wanted to become a leader, shaman, priest, priestess, king, queen, medicine man, healer, minister, and so on, in a particular family, clan, tribe, or small society. Desalles maintains that language was a product of not only information sharing but also

argumentation and verification. It was in conversation or dialogue that the communication of information could be assessed and verified. Desalles explains that

the behaviors underlying conversation obey unconscious mechanisms. Speakers drawing attention to salient situations, hearers trying to trivialize them, others expressing doubts about the internal consistency of what they are hearing are all behaving instinctively. . . . At stake in these conversations is something of vital importance to each of the speakers: who is going to have a close relationship with whom, who will rise in the estimation of others, who will gain the benefits and the influence that come with status. What we are unconsciously exercising in our conversations is part of our biological programming. Behind the immediate stimulus of exchanging relevant information, what we are doing is assessing others' ability to decide what is good for the set of people who will choose to ally with them. Language can thus be seen more as a means than as an end. Just as phonology makes for the construction of an extended lexicon, so our use of language makes for the construction of coalitions.¹¹

Telling effective, relevant stories became a vital quality for anyone who wanted power to determine and influence social practices. In the specific case of fairy tales, we shall see that they assumed salient aspects in conflict with other stories and became memetically and culturally relevant as a linguistic means to communicate alternative social practices. In the process fairy tales came to be contested and marked as pagan, irrelevant, and unreal. Poe traces how access and control over the changing media from antiquity to the present have defined which voices will be articulated and heard, and which stories will become part of a cultural network and tradition that people with different dispositions will either maintain or subvert.

Throughout human history, there has always been a tension between groups wanting to control speech and the way individuals have used speech to know themselves and the world. In his book *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Tomasello makes the point that

language is a form of cognition; it is packaged for the purposes of interpersonal communication. Human beings want to share experience with one another and so, over time, they have created symbolic conventions for doing that. . . . Given that the major function of language is to manipulate the attention of other persons—that is, to induce them to take a certain perspective on a phenomenon—we can think of linguistic symbols and constructions as nothing other than symbolic artifacts that a child's forbears have bequeathed to her for this purpose. In learning to use these symbolic artifacts, and thus internalizing the

perspectives behind them, the child comes to conceptualize the world in the way that the creators of the artifacts did.¹²

Indeed, stories emanated in prehistory from shared experiences, and this is still the case. It is through oral transmission that stories of different kinds form the textures of our lives. Tomasello demonstrates that children learn early in social contexts by becoming aware of the intentions of other human beings through imitation, instruction, and collaboration, and he contends that learning is dialectical, plus involves understanding metaphor and different perspectives. Knowing the world is determined by culture and genetics. Therefore, words must somehow fit the world if they are to be continuously transmitted. Children are born into a particular cultural niche that will influence how they begin to know the world and benefit from the cumulative heritage of culture. They learn how language and narratives provide access to power, or deny access to it.

If it is through language and story that cognition is fostered, it is all that much more important that we see the connections between ancient stories and how as well as why we continue to repeat them in innovative ways. Though we do not have printed records of how people told stories thousands of years ago, we do have enough archaeological evidence through cave paintings, vases, tombs, carvings, codices, and other artifacts to enable us to grasp what kinds of stories were told in ancient pagan cultures. In *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Walter Burkert makes some pertinent remarks about the origins and evolution of storytelling:

A tale becomes traditional not by virtue of being created, but by being retold and accepted; transmission means interaction, and this process is not explained by isolating just one side. A tale “created”—that is, invented by an individual author—may somehow become “myth” if it becomes traditional, to be used as a means of communication in subsequent generations, usually with some distortions and reelaborations. At any rate, it is a fact that there are traditional tales in most primitive and even in advanced societies, handed down in a continuous chain of transmission, suffering from omissions and misinterpretations but still maintaining a certain identity and some power of regeneration. The fundamental questions thus would be: How, and to what extent, can traditional tales retain their identity through many stages of telling and retelling, especially in oral transmission, and what, if any, is the role and function of such tales in the evolution of human civilization?¹³

Using Vladimir Propp’s classic study *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; translated into English in 1958), in which Propp developed his theory about the thirty-one functions of the Russian wonder tale, or what the American folklorist Alan Dundes calls the “motifemes” of a tale, Burkert maintains that one can find a similar sequence or pattern of functions/motifemes in

most fairy tales, myths, and other oral tales that involve the protagonist's departure/banishment from home to fulfill a lack.¹⁴ This departure is also a quest to acquire qualities, properties, and capabilities that will help him/her in conflict with an antagonist. Frequently there is a rescue of an oppressed or persecuted person, or a tentative accomplishment of a goal followed by tribulation, recuperation, and salvation. Depending on how one interprets and uses Propp's theorems, Burkert believes that they generally hold true in most traditional tales, and therefore he defines a tale as a "sequence of motifs; in linguistic terms: a syntagmatic chain with 'paradigmatic' variants; in more human terms: a program of actions—taking 'action' in a large sense, including plans, reactions, and passive experience in the sequence of the plot."¹⁵

Tales as programs of actions are derived, according to Burkert, from biological and cultural dispositions. That is, they emanate from social and biological practices that precede a communication. The various tale types are dependent on actions taken and conflicts that humans have experienced, and continue to experience, through biological and social behavior. Such basic actions as, for example, mating, procreation, child abandonment or abuse, hunting, planting, killing, exchanging gifts or people, violating women, and casting spells with words or signs involved programs of action and were structured in tales for effective communication. Burkert remarks that "the tale often is the first and fundamental verbalization of complex reality, the primary way to speak about many-sided problems, just as telling a tale was seen to be quite an elementary way of communication. Language is linear, and linear narrative is thus a way prescribed by language to map reality."¹⁶

Genres of storytelling and tale types originated from the application of storytelling and stories to social as well as biological life—that is, daily occurrences. Those tales that became relevant for families, clans, tribes, villages, and cities were retained through memory and passed on as traditional verbalizations of actions and behaviors. Different cultures throughout the world employed many of the same sequences of events or patterns in the communication of stories, but the application of the verbalization that included specific references to specific realities, customs, rituals, and beliefs led to various tale types, variants, and differences. For instance, almost all cultures have cannibalistic ogres and giants or dragons and monsters that threaten a community. Almost all cultures have tales in which a protagonist goes on a quest to combat a ferocious savage. The quest or combat tale is undertaken in the name of civilization or humanity against the forces of voracity or uncontrolled appetite. As a tale names characters, and makes distinctions among motifs, setting, and behavior, and as certain new stylistic and social applications are introduced or older ones are abandoned, the tale breathes differently—namely, it breathes new, meaningful life into the community of listeners, who often become carriers or tellers themselves. It defines itself differently while

adhering to a tradition of tales that may be indecipherable, but is inherent in the telling as well as the writing of a story.

Burkert states that

there is no denying that in any good tale, many additional structures may be discerned beyond the fundamental sequences of motifs, disregarding still further stabilizing structures of individual languages, such as meter, assonance, and rhyme. What makes a tale specific, effective, unforgettable, as it seems, may be the interplay of multiple structures. I call this the crystallization of a tale. Its elements may thus be heavily overdetermined on account of superimposed structures, so that every change of detail results in deterioration; this is the mark of art. The question remains, however, whether a traditional tale is transmitted as an elaborate work of art, or in some more basic form.¹⁷

In the fairy tale's case, we can see that it has crystallized or evolved into both an elaborate and simple narrative. If we take any of the classical fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," or "Beauty and the Beast," we can trace them as best as we can to tales of antiquity, perhaps even prehistory, that concern rape, sibling rivalry, and mating. The applied verbalization of social actions not only contributed to the formation of one particular tale type and genre such as the fairy tale but other genres as well that continue to interact with one another. In fact, the formation of the fairy tale as a genre can only be understood if we grasp its hybrid nature, and how it continues to borrow from, exploit, and thrive on storytelling innovations based on other simple genres. I shall discuss these innovations in the other chapters, but first it is necessary to understand how simple stories or genres contributed to the formation of the fairy-tale genre.

Simple Genres and Their Complex Interaction

Once upon a time—that is, about eighty years ago—a Dutch scholar by the name of André Jolles wrote an important yet nearly forgotten book about the interrelationship of short forms of narrative. The title of the book is *Einfache Formen: Legende/ Sage/Mythe/Rätsel/Spruch/Kasus/Memorabile/Märchen/Witz* (Simple forms: Legend/ rumor/myth/riddle/proverb/memoir/case reports/fairy tale/joke), and the subtitle indicates what Jolles means by simple forms. He believes that these forms of telling were the building blocks of more complex literary narratives, and that they were related to one another but separate because their functions, what he calls *Geistesbeschäftigungen*, were different.

The word *Geistesbeschäftigung*, which can be defined as "preoccupation," needs some explanation since Jolles uses it to make distinctions between the simple forms of narrative. In English, the German word *Geist* can mean "mind," and the word *Beschäftigung* can mean "occupation." Together they can

be interpreted to mean that the mind is occupied by a concern with something. In the case of storytelling, the mind is actually preoccupied by a concern with an action or behavior that needs to be verbalized, or calls for verbalization.

So, for instance, in the stone age if a man returned safely from an expedition into the forest where he had encountered a monstrous beast and killed it, his mind would have been preoccupied or already occupied by this clash, and he would have wanted to relate his experience to others in his clan as a warning or heroic deed. Undoubtedly, he would have used a particular simple form of narration to recount the salient aspects of his encounter, such as an anecdote, fable, exemplum, proverb, or fairy tale. Or he might have combined the forms to tell his story. What was and is crucial for this storyteller (and all storytellers) is shaping a tale so that it becomes alive, effective, and relevant. Indeed, he sought and seeks to make himself relevant.

While Jolles manages to make some critical distinctions among simple forms using this notion of preoccupation, his definitions of narrative genres lack historical substantiation and tend to be too abstract. Moreover, he overlooks other highly significant simple forms such as the anecdote, fable, ballad, and exemplum. Jolles's work nevertheless is important because it opens an approach to short narratives and verbalizations that allows us to understand their singular developments, and also the way that they are both related and interrelated to one another. Let us briefly consider the fable, for instance, and how it may have evolved to relate to the fairy tale, exemplum, animal tale, and warning narrative.

Most histories of the fable associate its beginnings with Aesop in 600 BC. Despite Aesop's significance, however, he did not invent the fable, which probably originated in Sumer and Mesopotamia sometime in 800 BC, and we are not even certain that he existed. But we are sure that archaeologists discovered didactic narrative works on clay tablets and in scripts that resemble the fable in form as well as subject matter, and these Sumerian and Babylonian texts were probably transmitted orally and through manuscripts to the ancient Greeks. The stories, although not called fables at that time, were short and primarily featured animals, which were anthropomorphized and exemplified a moral. As the fables were spread and transformed by different cultures, inanimate objects, mythical creatures, and even humans were often added to the cast of characters. Still, for the most part, animals dominated the stories and were involved in "human" conflicts that they had to resolve. The conflicts had to be adjudicated in such a way as to potentially establish ethical guidelines or principles of fair play. In this regard, fables contributed to the civilizing process of all societies and the constitution of the humanities. All the simple forms of narrative in fact weave themselves in and out of civilizing processes.

The development of the fable as genre is curious because most of these short, provocative stories were first part of a longer didactic literature such as *The Wisdom of Šur* (ca. 2500 BC) and were considered *exempla*—that is, fictional stories that provide a truth applicable in the real world as a moral.

Moreover, they were disseminated by word of mouth and script. In his significant study *The Ancient Fable*, Niklas Holzberg remarks:

It would, after all, be safe to say, that the narrative texts brought from Mesopotamia only circulated in very rare cases as actual reading material, because the books of wisdom were written in a foreign language. It is much more reasonable to assume that, between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C., Greek familiarity with originally Babylonian fable literature was based almost exclusively on oral tradition. And who better to tell such fables than natives of the Near East living in Greece, for example, educated citizens from the towns of Asia Minor who had been carried off as slaves? Perhaps in the end there really is some historical truth behind the legendary Aesop who lived in bondage on Samos?¹⁸

Whether there actually was a slave named Aesop who played a major role in creating and cultivating fables is a moot point. What is significant is that the Sumerian and Babylonian fables gradually became more widespread in Greece in 600 BC, and in some instances, Aesop was the alleged storyteller, but he never wrote down his tales that were not “his” tales. They survived by word of mouth along with many other Sumerian and Babylonian fables, and when free speech was established in the Greek city-states, rhetoricians began using the fable to teach style and rules of grammar to scholars, and discuss morals and ethics in debates. Yet the Aesopian tales had already become part of Greek popular culture, and as Leslie Kurke demonstrates in *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*, their importance, along with the anonymous *Life of Aesop*, reveals the profound depth and breadth of storytelling that contested the hegemonic rule of elite classes. Indeed, there are good reasons why the fables spread and have been spread memetically throughout the world. Kurke writes:

We might say that Aesop, like folktale tricksters in many different cultures, enables the articulation in public of elements of what the political theorist James Scott calls the “hidden transcript,” the counterideology and worldview developed by the oppressed when they are “offstage”—that is, free from the public world whose performances are largely scripted by the dominant. For the Aesop tradition exhibits simultaneously two characteristic forms of “political disguise” Scott identifies as enabling the speaking of opposition or resistance from the hidden transcript in the public world: anonymity of the messenger and indirection or obliquity of the message.¹⁹

As a reflection of the popularity of Aesop and his fables, there are many references to both in the works of Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek writers. By 300 BC Demetrius Phalereus, a distinguished Athenian statesman and orator, founded the Alexandria Library and collected two hundred fables in Greek prose under the title *Assemblies of Aesopic Tales*. Since

Alexandrian grammarians and scribes often used these fables in their teachings, the stories became known throughout the Mediterranean region, and at the beginning of the Christian era, Phaedrus, a Greek slave who was freed by Augustus, imitated them in Latin iambics. In the meantime, fables from India, associated with another legendary storyteller named Kasyapa, formed the basis of the Libyan fables of “Kybises” and were combined with Aesopian fables by a rhetorician named Nicostratus in the court of Marcus Aurelius. Then, in AD 230, Valerius Babrius turned three hundred of the Aesopian and Libyan fables into Greek verse with Latin meters. Rhetoricians and philosophers became accustomed to using the fables in exercises for their students and disciples, asking them to discuss and interpret the fables’ morals. Rules of style and grammar were to be learned through the fables, and the young scholars were encouraged to create new fables, which can be found in isolated works during the early years of the Roman Empire. Later, about AD 400, the Roman Avianus wrote forty-two fables in Latin verse, based primarily on Babrius’s work.

The spread of fables throughout the world is similar to the manner in which the so-called Aesopian tradition became established in Greece and then most of Europe. That is, fables became known through oral and literary cultivation. In India, for instance, Vishnu Sarma’s famous collection of tales, the *Panchatantra* (ca. 200 BC), contained animal fables in verse and prose in Sanskrit and Pali written by Bidpai. These stories stemmed from an oral tradition, as did the fables in Sintipas’s *The Story of the Seven Wise Masters* (ca. 100 BC). In most of the major countries and regions of the world, including China, Japan, Africa, South America, Australia, and North America, anthropologists and folklorists have discovered fable traditions of various kinds that are frequently related to one another. Moreover, in the Western tradition, many great authors have produced intriguing literary fables—Jean de La Fontaine, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Benjamin Franklin, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Tomas de Yriarte, Ivan Andreyevich Kriloff, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ambrose Bierce, Robert Louis Stevenson, and James Thurber, to name but a few.

In discussing the popularity of the fable, Thomas Noel observes,

Certain collections, particularly the fables attributed to the legendary Greek sage Aesop, continue to hold their own on the list of recommended children’s literature. Everyone knows the formula—a pithy narrative using animals to act out human foibles and a consequent moral, either explicit or implicit—and most people remain familiar with a handful of traditional fables, even though that familiarity might be hidden away in the dim recesses of the mind along with other prepuberty remembrances.²⁰

These remembrances have always been part of the human disposition toward storytelling and the fable’s historical texture that originated in oral traditions several centuries before Aesop supposedly began telling his tales. Aesop’s own fables were appropriated and modified by other great and not-so-great sto-

rytellers and artists as well as the common people. Notwithstanding the fact that adapters of Aesop's fables have used great poetic license, they have always been compelled to respect the genre's penetrating gaze into the dark side of human beings portrayed as animals in a dog-eat-dog world. Fables, inspired by Aesop, in this respect have generally posed a question that was at the heart of Aesop's tales: Can human beings rise above animals?

In her stimulating book *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, Annabel Patterson argues that the fable must always be understood in its social-historical context and, at the same time, has universal appeal because of the way it functions. Interpreted by specific cultures yet relevant throughout the ages, the fable speaks to unequal power relations and prompts those without power to speak in metaphoric codes that can emancipate both the teller and listener.²¹ Fables do not always end happily even when there is a resolution or moral. They move readers and listeners to contemplate how they might act if they were in a similar situation. They are simultaneously disturbing and enlightening. Fables are not preachy or moralistic in a strict sense because they expose the contradictions of human behavior more than they dictate principles of behavior. They explore the human condition rather than instruct how one must behave. They explain more than they sermonize. As exempla, fables warn and advise as opposed to prescribing behavior and manners. The listener and reader of a fable are always given a choice, and human agency is thus respected. Fables tell us that we all have choices to make.

As we can see, the preoccupation of the fable tends to be a short, metaphoric exploration of power relations that provides listeners with a moral or ethical example, and though the fable in its simple form is distinctly different from a fairy tale, the two genres also share a great deal because there is a certain overlap in their preoccupation. Jolles has some pertinent things to say about the fairy tale that reveal "universal" preoccupations, which account for similar stories throughout the world.

Influenced by Friedrich Schiller's treatise *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Jolles begins with the assumption that humans are all morally disposed and hence derive a naive moral pleasure in the natural world because of its sensuous truths. Nature reveals what we lack and also the possibility of discovering harmony. He distinguishes between the philosophical ethics of behavior based on Immanuel Kant's notion of duty, which must be taught and learned, and the ethics of incidents or happenings (*Geschehen*), which he calls naive morality based on natural disposition. For Jolles, in contrast to philosophical ethics, naive morality is *not* utilitarian, hedonistic, useful, or comfortable. Nor is it religious since it is tolerant, and not dictated by a specific divine order and socioreligious code. According to Jolles, naive morality is instinctual and prompts our pure ethical and absolute judgment.

If we now determine our form [of the fairy tale] from this perspective, then we can say that a form is present in the fairy tale in which

incidents (*Geschehen*) are or the course of things is ordered in such a way that it fully corresponds to the demands of naïve morality, in other words, to our absolute instinctual judgment of what is good and just. As such the fairy tale stands in the sharpest contrast to what we in the world are accustomed to calling actual events. The course of things in reality corresponds extremely rarely to the demands of naïve morality, or it is mostly unjust. In opposition, the fairy tale confronts the world of “reality” because this world of reality is not the world which confers values on a general valid way of life. It is a world in which the incidents contradict the demands of naïve morality, a world which we naively experience as immoral. One can say that here the preoccupation [of the fairy tale] has a double effect: on the one hand, the preoccupation grasps and holds on to the world negating it as a reality which does not suit the ethics of the events. On the other hand, the preoccupation affirms another world in which all the demands of naïve morality are fulfilled.²²

Indeed, the world of the fairy tale has always been created as a *counter-world* to the reality of the storyteller by the storyteller and listeners. Together, storytellers and listeners have collaborated through intuition as well as conscious conception to form worlds filled with naïve morality. Fundamental to the feel of a fairy tale is its moral pulse. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need. As types of fairy-tale telling evolved and became crystallized, the genre of the fairy tale borrowed and used motifs, themes, characters, expressions, and styles from other narrative forms and genres—and it still does. A good example is “Puss in Boots,” which has a close connection to the fable and legend.

As is well known, the basic plot of this tale involves an anthropomorphized cat, who helps the destitute third son in a family of peasants impress a pompous king through flattery and tricks so that the king will believe that the young peasant is a rich lord. The peasant is often portrayed as an awkward dunce, while the supernatural cat—sometimes a fairy or fox in different European, Middle East, and Asian variants—is clever, and instructs the peasant how to speak and dress, for underlying the fairy tale is the proverb “clothes make the person.”²³ Once the king believes that the peasant is a nobleman, the cat leads the king, his daughter, and the peasant to the large estate of an ogre. The cat rushes ahead of the party, outwits the ogre, and kills him. When the king, princess, and peasant arrive, the cat tells them that the castle and grand estate belong to the peasant, and the king, of course, gives his daughter to the peasant as his bride. They live happily ever after, and the cat is generally rewarded, for the animal is the actual hero/protagonist of the story.

Some critics interpret “Puss in Boots” as a “rise tale,” in which the peasant is elevated and becomes a nobleman. But the peasant is not the driving force of the tale. The cat/fox moves the action, for he/she is often threatened

with death by the peasant at the beginning of the tale, and must use his/her cunning to avoid death and find a rightful position. Quite frequently the cat/fox becomes a matchmaker, indicating a ritual role in marriage. As Hans-Jörg Uther notes, “The fox takes on an active role in contrast to the passive hero in various tales, particularly those that originate in Asia and are of the narrative type ATU 545B: *Puss in Boots*.”²⁴ Whether the hero is a cat or fox, this is a tale about the use of brains by cunning “people” in adapting to a difficult situation, and the active cat/fox exposes the contradictions and pretensions of the upper-class figures.

There are three major literary versions—crystallizations of oral folk tales, if you will—that have made this tale memetically traditional in the Western world: Giovan Francesco Straparola’s “Constantino Fortunato” in *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Pleasant Nights*, 1550/1553), Giambattista Basile’s “Cagliuso” in *Lo Cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*, 1634), and Perrault’s “The Master Cat, or Puss in Boots” in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Time Past*, 1697). They are all unique and have specific cultural differences. For instance, in Straparola’s tale, the cat is a fairy; in Basile’s story, the cat is almost killed by the ungrateful peasant, while Perrault’s cat becomes a royal messenger. But they all have some common features that reveal how they are closely bound to European, Middle Eastern, and Asian oral storytelling traditions about animal protagonists, and circulated hundreds of years before three educated writers shaped the tale in print. Nobody is certain when the first oral tale was created, and nobody will ever be able to determine the exact origins. Nevertheless, there are clues, fragments, and indications that this hybrid tale type involving motifs and themes such as an animal as helper, grateful recognition, the civilization of an uncouth lad, ruthless behavior for gain, and other popular themes was disseminated widely throughout the world. Ines Köhler-Zülch reports that hundreds of versions can be found in Europe, the Middle East, North and South Asia, North Africa, and North America.²⁵

Dan Ben-Amos, an astute American folklorist, has made the following comment about Straparola’s version:

In this tale, European folk religion and folk literature converge and mutually influence each other, for the function of cats as agents of magical transformation in fairy tales builds upon supernatural associations, which are themselves distant reflections of cats in the mythology of the ancient world. In ancient Egypt, cats were an object of religious belief and ritual. . . . Bast, the cat goddess in Egypt, was a beneficent deity and a healer of disease. She was worshipped in ritual, festivities, and pilgrimages. And although the cult of Bast was not transferred to Rome, the related cult of Isis was. Mildred Kirk explains that Isis was “derived from Bast” and that she preserved Bast’s association with the sacredness of cats. In European countries, cats were stripped from their position as objects of worship in religious cults and ritual, but they retained their

supernatural powers. Often they were considered the tangible representations of witches and fairies.²⁶

In the three books of tales written by Straparola, Basile, and Perrault, which contain *mixed* genres, the authors make it clear that their stories do not belong to them but instead breathe through them. *They are to be told because they were told*. Straparola and Basile set frames in which characters from different social backgrounds tell tales, riddles, fables, anecdotes, and morals, while Perrault suggests that his tales were told to him by a nanny or mother goose figure. The tales that these authors heard were written to be told aloud because oral storytelling was the dominant mode of disseminating stories among all classes during the Renaissance.

Straparola is especially significant, not because he was an original storyteller or creator of the fairy tale, but because he wove all the simple forms of different genres into a master frame tale that celebrates storytelling, and in doing so, showed a great debt to a long history of Greco-Roman oral and literary storytelling that insightful scholars such as Burkert, Anderson, and Hansen, among others, have studied and documented. Among the seventy-four tales that Straparola recorded, fourteen can be designated as fairy tales.²⁷ All fourteen are remarkably different tale types with different plots and patterns, showing traces of Babylonian, Indian, Arabic, North African, and Hebrew oral storytelling and literary traditions that prefigured the artful cultivation of printed tales in the vernacular. Straparola's stories deal with basic human concerns such as incest ("Tebaldo"), mating ("The Pig Prince"), sibling rivalry and jealousy ("Ancilotto, King of Provino"), the master/slave relationship ("Maestro Lattantio and His Apprentice Magician"), and premarital sex and class struggle ("Pietro the Fool"). While many of the tales are related to Italian customs, laws, and rituals, others can be linked to tales from the medieval Arabic *Thousand and One Nights* and the Indian *The Ocean of Story* as well as the numerous adaptations of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* of the second century. As Bartolomeo Rossetti indicates in his superb 1966 introduction to Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti*,

The writers of Italian stories, beginning with the anonymous *Il Novellino* and [Giovanni] Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which is the acknowledged masterpiece of this most fertile genre, drew fully from the Oriental fairy tales, and we could also say, directly from the commercial and cultural exchanges with the Orient that had been conducted for centuries with the Italian coastal republics, above all with Venice. The continual flow of fairy-tale elements characteristic of the Orient and Arabic culture in particular fortuitously enriched the body of Italian story writing in this way. It was not the only factor. In the fervor generated by the study of the classics in the period of Humanism, there was also the rediscovery of ancient fairy-tale motifs such as the adventures and the amazing vicissitudes of the protagonist of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. All this continually

reinvigorated the fortune and richness of this narrative current, already fortunate and rich, that formed the literary arch from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century, from Boccaccio to Basile.²⁸

In the process of writing down literary and oral tales, Straparola selected and shaped those that he considered relevant, just as the tales themselves sought to be memetically relevant.

Memetics and Cultural Evolution

All tales want to be relevant, in the same way that we seek to make ourselves relevant through storytelling. Tales do not have agency. They are not alive, but they breathe and are vigorous, and as they are passed on to us through traditions of storytelling, they almost assume a life of their own. In my book *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, I sought to explain why certain fairy tales rise to the fore in our minds and Western culture, competing with other tales, and assume a specific status as classical or traditional. Some of these tales—such as “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “Bluebeard,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Puss in Boots,” and “Beauty and the Beast”—are so well known and have spread so widely in the world in all kinds of mediated forms that they appear to be universal memes, and I have tried to understand their significance as memes—a concept developed by Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*.

Dawkins maintains that there is one fundamental law of life that he believes is undeniable: “the law that all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities. The gene, the DNA molecule, happens to be the replicating entity that prevails on our own planet. There may be others. If there are, provided certain other conditions are met, they will almost inevitably tend to become the basis for an evolutionary planet.” In fact, Dawkins argues that there is another replicator, which he calls a meme, a unit of cultural transmission.

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 gene 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. . . . [M]emes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus

may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn't just a way of talking—the meme for, say, “belief in life after death” is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.²⁹

In the years 2004–6, as I was writing *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, there were several serious books and essays about the meaning of memes, but the concept of a meme or memetics had not become popular and widespread. Yet within a short period of time—five years—the term “meme” has itself become somewhat memetic, and there are now over 441 million hits on Google to examine if one does a search for meme or memetics.³⁰ As we know, popularity can become dangerous for a person and term; it can cause the person and term to become trivial and meaningless. It can also bring about celebrity. To say the least, meme has suffered from its popularity and is now loosely used for anything and everything that becomes trendy and acts like a virus. The significance attached to it by Dawkins has largely been lost.

Nevertheless, there are numerous serious scholars who have endeavored carefully to explain the role that memetics plays in different cultural and scientific fields. Here I am thinking of Marion Blute's *Darwinian Sociocultural Evolution: Solutions to Dilemmas in Cultural and Social Theory* (2010), Distin's *The Selfish Meme* (2005) and *Cultural Evolution* (2011), Drouot's *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (2006), Konner's *The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind* (2010), Alex Mesoudi's *Cultural Evolution: How Darwinian Theory Can Explain Human Culture and Synthesize the Social Sciences* (2011), and Stephen Shennan's *Genes, Memes, and Human History: Darwinian Archaeology and Cultural Evolution* (2002). They all share a thoughtful approach to memetics, and while some of them have some doubts about the scientific validity of memetics, they have demonstrated why the term can be helpful in understanding cultural evolution.

Konner, for instance, views the meme as an elementary unit of cultural transmission, and contends, as do Distin and Blute, that

the meme has proved useful in understanding cultural stability and change; at least four theories of cultural evolution have been based on it or some equivalent. As with genes, the faithfulness of replication and its associated repair mechanisms can ensure stability over time. And also as with genes the replication process is imperfect and errors have a creative function, serving as grist for the mill of cultural change, much as mutations offer the genetic variation that natural selection acts upon. But memes are largely independent of genes and enter a process of cultural evolution to some extent independent of its biological counterpart.³¹

He meticulously describes why and how memes function for children within a civilizing process, or what he calls acculturation. Memes, or cultural units of in-

formation such as stories, form meme or culture pools over time. Children's acculturation depends on memes, which do not always function smoothly. They undergo change through innovation, the influence of chance events, the social transmission between populations, the movement of carriers between populations, the natural selection of cultural variants, preservation through free decisions, and coerced preservation. Konner points out that "cultural constraints include the limits imposed by technology, mental habit, and other inertial factors that correspond to stabilizing cultural selection, the default condition of cultural transmission. Values, imposition, and cultural constraints, among other factors, affect the flow of memes, so that different ones have different degrees of likelihood of being transmitted to the next generation's culture pool."³²

Drout's book, which is more concerned with oral and literary traditions than it is with the evolution of childhood, complements Konner's work by providing a thorough analysis of how memes as the simplest units of cultural replication function to form oral traditions. He maintains that

a tradition is an unbroken train of identical, non-instinctual behaviors that have been repeated after the same recurring antecedent conditions. The first time a behavior is enacted cannot be a tradition, but the second time can be, and the first enactment is then retrospectively defined as the origin of the tradition. . . . In memetic terms, a tradition is a combination of several smaller memes. The traditional behavior can be seen as one meme; let us call it *actio*. The response to the given antecedent condition that triggers the traditional behavior is another meme that enables the first meme; let us call it *recognitio*.³³

Drout outlines a dialogic and dialectical process of action, recognition, and justification, which is an explanation for the behavior, and this process enables a specific cultural meme to develop into a universal one because it fits general cultural views more than other cultural units of information. In other words, the meme must be relevant if it is to be passed on. It must contain a "word-to-world fit" that justifies its relevance; otherwise it will not be disseminated. The crucial elements in the evolution of the memetic process are repetition and memory. Drout asserts that

repetition creates patterns, and human brains, among their other talents, are sublime pattern-recognizers. The combination of the patterns created by repetition with the human ability to recognize patterns means that in a culture that includes repeated traditions, information (memes) may be encoded and transmitted in significantly compressed form. Memes can also be retrieved from incomplete or noisy data, allowing traditionally encoded patterns to be transmitted and received in many different situations.³⁴

In the case of fairy tales—and also such other simple forms or genres as the fable, myth, and legend—memes help create and build traditions by creating

pools of stories, millions of stories, predicated on the human communication of shared experience. In human minds, we have made distinctions about which tales are more relevant than others and retain in memory the most relevant to retell and re-create. As programs of action, to recall Burkert's view of tales, fairy tales are preoccupied with removing listeners and readers from the world of reality to provide an alternative world of naive morality, and they have evolved by gathering fragments, bits of information, motifs, and characters from stories that have circulated around them. The fairy tale, as a memetic genre that retains its roots in oral traditions, has formed distinct patterns of action, employing other media such as print, electronics, drawing, photography, movies, and digital technology to create counterworlds and gain distance from our world of reality so that we can know it as well as ourselves. In the process fairy tales have been changed while changing the media. The salience and/or relevance of memetic fairy tales, which offer alternative patterns of action to real social behavior, is a cultural indication of what we have endeavored to communicate to help one another adapt to changing environments while preserving an instinctual morality. The memetic crystallization of certain fairy tales as classical does not make them static for they are constantly re-created and reformed, and yet remain memetic because of their relevant articulation of problematic issues in our lives. Fairy tales, like our own lives, were born out of conflict.

Fairy tales were not created or intended for children. Yet they resonate with them, and children recall them as they grow to confront the injustices and contradictions of so-called real worlds. We cannot explain why the origins of the fairy tale are so inexplicable and elusive. But we can elucidate why they continue to be irresistible and breathe memetically through us, offering hope that we can change ourselves while changing the world.