

To Be or Not to 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 top a six feet 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 he 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 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. Humans or humans are the ones projected as monsters who eat and destroy their own.

Why?

In her thought-provoking and comprehensive study *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 imaginary 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 in 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."^[1]

Though food may be the dominant element in folklore, Warner makes clear that there is no one exclusive reason for the unsavory and uncontrollable appetite of adults, often projected metaphorically as monsters, who abuse their power over children. The causes are numerous: famine, starvation, disobedience of the young, fear of losing power, jealousy, 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 have his bones to grind my bread.

But it's not only young Jack who is often in danger of being devoured. 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.

In many of the Sicilian folk tales I have recently translated there is a Mama-Drago or sometimes just a Drago,

who is essentially characterized by her or his desire for human flesh. In one of Giuseppe Pitre's variants of "Rapunzel" called "The Old Woman in the Garden," the witch is not as benign as she is often depicted. She wants the daughter of the woman who trespassed in her garden so that she can eat the young girl. Recently, I came across a Somali tale, "Deg-Der," which means "Long Ear." It concerns a good woman who, after the birth of her third child, suddenly turns into a cannibal and eats her husband. She continues to thrive on human flesh, especially the young, but she doesn't eat her own daughters. In fact, they kill her, and the girls celebrate and marry, except that the third daughter is reluctant to marry because she fears that she, too, may be cursed by the same fate and turn cannibal after the birth of her third daughter. Her future husband convinces her that her fear is ridiculous. They marry and have three children, and one day, when he returns from work and wants to enter the house, he has an unpleasant surprise.

I won't tell you the chilling end of this tale. You can probably guess. You probably won't even be surprised. After all, we live in a world filled with draculas, vampires, vicious demons from outer space, sinister robots run amuck, demented scientists, sadistic serial killers, and barbaric politicians, indifferent to the murder of innocent children that they cause. Nothing, however, should surprise us. We live in a world clouded by hysteria and hypocrisy in which child abuse and poverty are rampant. We are living 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 overall arching narrative to provide us with security. But as we pursue this narrative, or rather, narratives, I believe we must first recognize that there is one common denominator 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 are responsible for much of the misunderstandings and conflicts 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 for crimes against children and humanity? How do we find truth in untruthful tales and believe traditional storytellers—priests, ministers, rabbis, tribal leaders, shamen, Imen, 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 the questions we must ask about traditional tales and their survival concern: Which traditional tales dominate 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 generally fostered by the church, state, and educational systems. The Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist religions and others have made their mark in the world and organized 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. 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 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. Thus, not all the tales that have become canonical 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 a counter-canonical tradition of storytelling. 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 they foster many different versions that are worth studying because they reflect changing values, morals, and politics in a given society.

Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that, to become literate today, to function as a world citizen and attain power, 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. Whether an individual actually believes the appropriate story is not significant, just as long as the canonical tale has been registered and is registered in his or her brain. Once registered by the brain, tales have a memetic function. That is, they are like parasites and will feed off the brain and can be spread as memes to other brains through the spoken word. A culture of a particular group is established linguistically through narrative exchange that determines the relevance of belief systems which hold people together. As a group of people survive in a particular region, they continually cultivate their own relevant customs through different modes of storytelling to stabilize their lives and to transmit to the young their values 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 think and view their lives. Traditional storytelling is thus essentially conservative, tends to conserve the interests of the status quo, but it cannot exclude counter-traditional tales, for it cannot totally govern word of mouth. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency in western societies by the state, church, 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, ape, and imitate. Instead of gaining a sense of

tradition through personal experience and experimentation, we are to learn, often by rote, what our tradition is and how we can come to know ourselves through mass-mediated and censored 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; 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 Cultural Transmission of Tradition

On September 12, I was driving my car and listening, as is my wont, to 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 on Abraham in hopes of understanding his 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, who apparently either killed Isaac and Ishmael, or was ready to sacrifice them. 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?

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 remain 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.

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 my talk on traditional storytelling that I knew I was to give in Madison at the beginning of November. 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 and how he could 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 the problematics of the cultural transmission of tradition today and 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 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 Christa 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. Not only had I heard correctly, but I discovered that Feiler had also been interviewed by Neil Conan, two years ago on "Talk of the Nation," September 24, 2002, and I was able to read the transcript of this program as well, and I came across an exchange that struck me as highly significant, and I would like to share it with you. 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: Hmm.

Mr. 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."'

Mr. 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 should we pay homage to a child abuser and an imaginary deity, and she referenced Alice Miller's significant 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 harm the lives of children. Whereas Mimi wants to challenge and open the frame in which Feiler and Conan discuss the tradition of Abraham, they quickly and blithely close it to conceal some bitter truths.

This is not to say that Feiler and Conan are close-minded, or that the overall system of mass communication is dismissive of criticism and counter-traditional tales. But the modus operandi in the mass media, the public sphere, and most of our institutions will only tolerate benign questioning of established traditions and insist on conserving and building on traditional narratives.

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 to preserve itself, including the sacrifice of the young, storytellers who have a deep concern 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 post-modern 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 he 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.”^[2]

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 genealogy. 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.” [3]

The practice of subversive genealogy is not to recuperate traditions that have been marginalized, suppressed, or occluded but 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.” [4] 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 authenticity 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 and is concerned with developing a theoretical critique. 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 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 theoretical analysis. 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 and, in light of the instrumentalization of their traditions by religions, schools, and market forces, how have they told all kinds of traditional tales to endow their existence on this planet with meaning?

To begin to answer these questions even partially, we must return to Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin because they raised the question of *Umfunktionierung* not as an intellectual one, but to address political and cultural practice during the 1920s and 1930s. That is, each one of these writers were concerned that the Volk might become *völkisch*, the people might become popularist in a reactionary sense. Indeed, their traditions were being filled by Nazi reutilized myths that 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 in *Heritage of Our Times* (1934); Benjamin presented his views about this in his famous essay “The Storyteller” and in other essays on Brecht and epic theater in the 1930s; 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 and open-ended stories and plays that audiences, namely the people, were encouraged to resolve. Such resolution would involve cohesion by understanding differences, coming together to resolve differences, and through this coming together, an identity through interests could be maintained. In this way tradition could be continued through critical appropriation.

It is not by chance that Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin were continually 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 and returned this material to them to keep alive their hope that the small people could overcome obstacles, outwit giants, prevent ogres and witches from eating them, and determine their own destinies. 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 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 by different groups of people and traditions maintained 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 value or non-value of traditions. Ever since the 1970s in America, professional storytellers and storytellers who represent ethnic minority groups 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. 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 folk tales, as if they were authentic remnants from the past that must be treated in a holy 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,

for example, 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. Indeed, much of tradition is often romanticized in compelling tales that are twisted into chauvinistic, biased, sexist, and racist tales that storytellers without thinking like to present for tradition for tradition’s sake. In 1993 Roger Abrams called upon folklorists to shake off the phantoms of romantic nationalism and address the complex nature 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 make this self-evident.”

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 than 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. 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. 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, breathe life into all things and moving 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, an animator, and as I have provocatively argued elsewhere, a thief who robs treasures to give something substantive to the poor.

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."^[5] 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 and 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 common sense struggle for survival, and a struggle for the survival of imaginative vision."[\[6\]](#)

How do 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 risk not only losing the imaginative vision, but we place our children at risk as we already have. Their survival depends on our continual engagement in with cultural traditions, opening them up, and opening ourselves in the process.

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Endnotes

1 [\[1\]](#) Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998): 12-13.

1 [\[2\]](#) David Gross, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): 108.

1 [\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, 117.

1 [\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, 135.

1 [\[5\]](#) Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites* (New York: Pantheon, 1998): 113.

1 [\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, 116.
