

Stories in Transit: Telling the Tale in Times of Conflict

Storie in transito: Raccontare e [rac] conti in tempi di conflitto

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Story

Under what tree, in what part of the forest, beside which branch
of the leaf-obstructed stream, in sun or in rain,

concreted into what foundation, supporting whose house,¹

[...] belonging to whom, missed
by whom, questioned by which particular method, scarred where,

repaired where, reopened how, broken how,
how *taken care of*, transported how, buried

how, in what manner and from what platform disclaimed
during which international crisis, during which electoral year,

under whose watch, under whose watch and why will it surface,
why will it then be permitted to surface,

the end of the story, the body we need?

Frances Leviston, 'Story' from *Disinformation* (London: Picador, 2015)

Can myths, legends, and stories provide alternative shelter, literary *lieux de mémoire* where a refugee, a migrant, or a wanderer might feel at home or make a place to dwell? In today's geopolitical upheavals, when millions of people have been displaced and are on the move, can narratives travel between cultures and languages? The religious and ethnic tensions that are causing, alongside the fight to control oil, so much of the current flight of people from the Middle East and Africa are creating cultural diasporas, and these refugees, as they enter the societies where they are to live, are establishing and will continue to establish, communities – translated communities – of people who will need to negotiate their place in relation to the local culture and vice versa. Travelling texts, in the form of stories, histories, songs, poems, play a vital part in these newly formed societies and, as they travel

and become entangled (it is no surprise this term has emerged as a defining concept of our times), they change shape.

Is there a horizon of the imagination beyond the nation-state or imperial hegemonies, political and economic? As George Seferis asked, and Seamus Heaney repeated, Can literature be ‘strong enough to help’? Can a memory of literature and the process of making it over and over again build a country of words? How to narrate a place of belonging without a nation? Can literature – especially imaginative works of myth, legend, fairy tale and fable – maps geographies of home onto surroundings that are not home? Can a story provide shelter? The literary scholar Bruce Robbins has asked if story-telling and story-making today can engage with contemporary experiences – with the fates of so many people. He writes, ‘this desire for justice is also normal within a global tradition of storytelling that’s much larger than realism: that narrative as such poses the broader question of what circle of readers can recognize themselves at any given moment as a political collectivity or community of fate, whether in any given narrative enough guests have been invited.’² The idea of ‘communities of fate’ defines a possibility of imaginative co-existence, a way of dwelling in fractured space and interrupted time. Robbins continues, ‘But I would also like to think that there exists a narrative, or a possibility of narrative, within “world literature,” a narrative in which the emergence of the category of “world literature” would constitute a significant event. Contemplating a seemingly endless series of atrocities receding into the depths of time, atrocities that no longer seem easily divided between modern and ancient, it may seem that meaningful history has become impossible and that literature itself, taken as existing outside of time, is the best refuge from the centuries and centuries and centuries of meaninglessness.’³

Homo narrans –l’homme-récit or la femme-récit, according to the term coined by Tsvetan Todorov, defines human beings as narrators, irrepressible makers up of stories, gossips, reporters, fantasists and dreamers – anthologists and recyclers of old stories. A detailed scientific phylogenetic study, published in January 2016, uses big data techniques to demonstrate that certain well-known fairy tales were already being told in deep time and have been transmitted, recognisably, across time and geography - even when their original languages are now extinct.⁴

Myths, and the related corpus of folk and fairy tales are stories held in common, protean and ancient – though there are new variations generated all the time (Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is subtitled *The New Prometheus*). Paul Ricoeur has commented, ‘Telling a

story is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgement operates in a hypothetical mode.’⁵ These thought experiments provide vehicles for personal invention and witness, they can tell truths and peddle lies; they can express the most yearning ideals of the utopian imagination and entrench the most obscurantist righteous bigotry. Human beings respond imaginatively to the perplexities of reality; homo narrans, mulier narrans are not nourished if the stories are swept away, however much what is called reason resists the snares of myth; secondly – and this is more important - the lessons of history, and especially of 20th and 21st century history, are that myth is always being made and remade to serve the interests of a group. We live in the stories we pass on and the stories we invent and how they report on experience; one of the territories that needs to be re-occupied is narrative. While enlightened and post-Enlightenment anxiety about myths was justified, in that indeed the myths are instruments of ideology and have indeed often been told by the powerful to consolidate their power, now is the time to regain that territory and weave alternative versions, counter-narratives. Books, the bearers of stories, and writers and storytellers, the hakawati, the rawi or rawati, the rhapsodes, the bearers of words, can build shelters and sanctuaries and bridges. Terence Cave, the literary scholar has recently written, ‘Human cognition is alert, attentive, responsive. Above all, it is *imaginative*: it can think beyond the constraints of immediate experience, do strange things with words, conjure up futures and histories of all kinds, bring to life people who never existed and invent for them plausible stories and environments. Despite the tangible evidence that this is so, the word ‘cognition’ has traditionally been used to refer to the rational knowledge-seeking processes of the mind as opposed to other modes of engagement with the world.’

It is not easy always to know how a story becomes mobile, or indeed to locate the moment when its life as an autonomous travelling text began, but this mobility and polymorphousness are distinguishing features of myth and fairy tale: the story of Joseph in Egypt, of Abraham or the Virgin Mary is attested by the Bible and the Qur’an; the Cinderella figure has some well-known domiciles in the collections of Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers; Hamlet is most famous from Shakespeare’s tragedy, but his story has antecedents, and deep affinities with the Greek myth of Orestes. Strong examples of such mythic wandering stories include the Thousand and One Nights and the cycle of stories about the Trojan War and its aftershocks.

The question of time is crucial: the story in motion, while tied to a particular place and to particular events which took place then: in Thebes, Baghdad, Troy, Carthage, once

upon a time. But it is in the very nature of such stories that the past becomes present and has implications for the future, that within the demarcated space of the story – be it told on the page or on some kind of stage – the events that are re-enacted and re-visioned are fore-tokens: the stories in motion bring news of what might be; they announce ways of connecting to immediate experience. ‘Stories are a form of action,’ wrote Hannah Arendt ‘the way we insert ourselves into the human world’⁶ and that ‘the ability to produce stories is the way we become historical’.

‘In order to have a story’, comments Lorraine Daston, in order to become historical, ‘one must have listeners, with whom one shares a common language, fellow feeling, and an understanding of the home left behind. All these things are denied the modern exiles. At most, a journalist or a Red Cross official takes down a telegraphic version of the catalogue of horrors suffered: a sound byte, not a story.’ She goes on to ask, ‘What does it take to have a story, a life that makes sense in a senseless world of forced wandering that shatters all continuity? ... Even the luckiest exiles, those who are able to settle and prosper in a new land, must face the bitter truth that their native tongue will no longer be spoken gladly by their own grandchildren, that their stories will be increasingly lost in translation’.

Cultural and literary transmission of myth and story is a process of constant, deep and fruitful metamorphosis, acts of memory against forgetting, acts of bonding against forces of splitting. These metamorphoses take place in dialogue with written texts, but are not constrained by writing: indeed mobile narratives are a dynamic feature of contemporary culture because the internet and digital technologies have opened up a vast arena for varieties of performance, recitation, speech, combining sound, image, voice. The traffic in mobile myths is rising with the strong and omnipresent return of acoustics to communication – we have entered a hybrid era, in which the oral is no longer placed in opposition to the literate - When Borges commented that he had always imagined Paradise will be a kind of library’, it is interesting to remember that the great writer was himself blind for a great part of his life, and he was read to – books for him were *sounded*.

The United Nations has started to respond to the immaterial needs of displaced peoples – that cultural heritage – connectedness and belonging established through memory and imagination, might be a human right has become what is being called the new frontier. Such compass points are formed, often, not by material goods, but by immaterial artefacts: by words spoken, recited, performed, sung, and remembered. They may be preserved in books but they also travel by other ethereal conduits, especially in the age of the internet when they are at one and the same time vigorous and fragile. They may inhere in ... things,

containers of memories and history. In 2003, Unesco declared protection for intangible cultural heritage, but the dominant implication was that this applied principally to the culture of unlettered peoples – to orature. This needs adjusting – highly literate civilisations also flourish through oral – performed, played - channels of transmission.

Stories in Transit will explore ways the creation and transmission of stories can be supported in communities of people who have been displaced. Following a workshop in Oxford on certain mnemonic techniques, including rhythm and gesture, metre and rhyme, the participants will explore, in the inspiring setting of the Sicilian puppet museum, Museo Internazionale delle Marionette in Palermo G. Pasqualino, how narratives travel between cultures and languages through performance, recitation, and other methods (mime, dance, music, masks and masking). The conference will bring together writers, artists, architects, and performers from various communities, including asylum seekers, refugees and displaced persons, as well as from with representatives of NGOs such as Bibliothèques sans Frontières and Save the Children, and members of local associations and activists.

¹ The lines between are:

deaf

to how many dinner parties, subjected to how many holding-forths,
 compacted along with what model of car, with what registration,
 wearing which perfume and what sort of pearls,
 in the back-of-beyond of what country, adjoining whose under-
 development land, masked by which strain of animal fodder's

pollen blown from the next field along...

² Bruce Robbins, 'Prolepsis and catastrophe', in XXXWorld Literature, ed. Paulo Horta, NYU Press, forthcoming.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sara Graça da Silva, Jamshid J. Tehrani, 'Comparative phylogenetic analyses uncover the ancient roots of Indo-European folktales' R. Soc. open sci. 2016 3 150645; DOI: 10.1098/rsos.150645. Published 14 January 2016
<http://rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/3/1/150645>

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p 170

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), p. 25.