STYLE AND GENRE IN ORAL LITERATURE*

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Two kinds of folk narrative, the legend and the fairy tale, have a special legitimation: they are found among almost all peoples and in almost all periods. Both forms are largely independent of epochs and individuals and seem to answer special needs of the human mind. Both are formed according to certain laws which are independent of the particular narrator. Their impersonal validity makes their investigation important especially for the science of literature, but not less for psychology and the history of religion.

Let us demonstrate the difference in character between the fairy tale and the legend through the example of the narrative about the animated doll. From a collection of Alpine legends we cite a simply told variant of the tale about the **Sennentunsch** (Alpine herdsmen's doll, a sort of effigy) from canton Uri:

> At the **Gescheneralp** (mountain pasture of Goeschenen) there once lived some wanton herdsmen. They led a

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wild life, did not pray, and scoffed at holy things and divine commandments. Once, out of rags, they made a big doll. They treated it frivolously, smeared it with cream, and plastered it with milk-rice. Finally, the chief herdsman christened it. Now the doll came to life and began to speak. When the herdsmen recovered from their panic, they kept up their wanton frolic and behaved even worse. After a while, the monster would go up to the roof of their hut at night and trot there like a horse. In the autumn, when they came down from the pasture, the herdsmen forgot the milking stool. When they realized it, none dared go back to fetch it, for they were afraid. So they drew lots and the lot fell upon the worst of them all. He went back. The others went on with the cattle and, when at the high point now called **Abfrutt** they looked back, they saw the monster spreading the skin of their fellow on the roof of the hut.

Ever since, a hideous ghost roams about that place and it has been impossible to use those pastures.[1]

Next, the Greek fairy tale about Mr. Groats:

Once, a long time ago, there was a king who had a daughter. She had a lot of suitors, but she did not want any of them because she did not like them. So the thought came to her to make a husband herself. She took a pound of almonds, a pound of sugar, and a pound of groats, mixed them all together, and from the mix kneaded a man and put him before the house icon. Then she knelt and began to pray. She prayed for forty days and forty nights. After forty days, God put life into the groatsman. He was called Mr. Simigdáli or Mr. Groats. He was very beautiful and his name became famous the world over. A queen of a far-away country also heard about him and decided to go and kidnap him. She built a golden ship with golden oars and sailed to the town where he lived . . . .

In the sequel it is told how the kidnapping took place, and how the first wife and creator of Mr. Groats set out to regain him. After visits to the mothers of the moon, sun, and stars where she receives gifts, the

princess arrives at the palace of the distant queen. There she is allowed, in return for her three gifts, to pass three nights with Mr. Groats. "Why do you not wake up? Behold, it is me who prepared the almonds, kneaded the dough and prayed to God, it is me who has made you, who has worn out three pairs of iron shoes to find you." On the third night Mr. Groats hears her and flees with her.

The tale concludes:

> When the queen learned that Mr. Groats had disappeared, she started to cry. But what could she do? She said: "I, too, will make a husband for myself." She ordered her servants to crack almonds and to mix them with sugar and groats. From the mix she kneaded a man. She knelt before it, but, instead of praying, she uttered curses. After forty days the man was rotten, and they threw him away. The king's daughter reached her kingdom with Mr. Groats, and they lived well and ever better.[2]

The two tales do not correspond only in the basic motif--a doll is made and animated--but also in many details. The king's daughter wants to create a husband for herself; the herdsmen, a woman. This fact, only hinted at in our variant, is expressed clearly in other variants from Uri: "The doll represented a female; they performed all vices with it."[3] In most cases the effigy is made of rags, though sometimes, as in the fairy tale, of foodstuffs. The herdsmen shape it from cheese;[4] the effigy made of wood and of rags is fed milk rice. In all instances the relation to human food is emphasized. The object's coming to life, in both the legend and the fairy tale, is brought about by a sacral act: in the former by christening, in the latter by prayer. The Greek princess puts her groats-man before the house-icon; the herdsmen of Uri put theirs into the Lord's corner.[5]

And now the crucial differences:

In the fairy tale a human being of perfect beauty comes into existence without any abnormal trait in his shape or behavior. The scarecrow, however, is a pitiable caricature from the start. "They made an effigy out of rags and called it 'Tzurreemutze,' and when they were eating their rice-pap, they said to it: 'There, eat too!' and smeared pap on its face."[6] It is indeed smeared with rice-pap and cream! "They smeared a pap under its nose and around its mouth."[7] More than one variant relates how the doll begins to eat by itself and swells up grotesquely. "It came alive, devoured heaps of food indecently, and became big and fat. They had to attend to it and carry it out into the sun."[8] "It became awfully fat, and they had to carry it out into the sunshine."[9] "Every Sunday they had to carry it to a nearby place in the sun. It was so fat that the three herdsmen together were scarcly able to carry it."[10] "Schatzäli [sweetheart] became fat and fatter. . . ."[11] "Then the doll began to grow horribly until it became a real monster."[12] Corresponding to its gruesome appearance is the doll's dreadful behavior: the flaying of the herdsman and the spreading of the bloody skin on the roof of the hut.[13] The fairy tale princess, on the contrary, lives with her Mr. Simigdáli "well and ever better."

Sexual and erotic incidents are widespread throughout the legend in spite of the cautious coyness of some narrators. "And they made love to the doll, and took it to bed, and--what is hardly proper for me to tell but for the fact that we are both getting on in years--satisfied their desire on it."[14] In the fairy tale, the starting point of the action is the wish of the king's daughter for a suitable husband whom she will like. In

the legend, which is more complex, other motivations are at work as well: the wanton joy of play, forbidden wastefulness and violation of food, and sinful fetishism. The princess aims purely and plainly toward a single goal (namely to get a husband). Nevertheless, there is not the slightest trace of eroticism in the fairy tale! All murkiness is sublimated to a transparent picture, to a pure gesture.

Like the tension of sexuality, religious tension is lacking in the fairy tale. The herdsmen's actions are explicitly sacrilegious; they challenge the Christian God by christening the doll, or by desecrating the Lord's corner, sometimes also by the naming of the doll (in two variants the effigy is called "Mary").[15] On the other hand, the fairy tale succeeds in rendering harmless a wicked deed: the aping of the divine act of creation. In a natural, matter-of-fact way and with childish piety, God is even invited to take part in the action. After the princess' forty days of prayer (the time count is formulaic and there is no report of physical or pyschical tension), God animates the dough-man for the lady for whom none of His creatures were good enough. In this way the fairy tale succeeds, playfully and in a matter-of-fact way, to substitute devout prayer for the sacrilegious christening. Thus the fairy tale princess aims consciously from the start at the animation of the doll she has kneaded. In contrast, in the multi-layered and much less defined legend, the animation, although provoked, is not intended in earnest. It is not the work of God as in the fairy tale, but rather the deed of nameless, incomprehensible powers. The animation produces dread, which in turn is permeated with sacrilegious acts and greed, while in the fairy tale both the princess and everyone else accept the anima-

tion of the groatsman without any astonishment.

There is no doubt that the legend is a more primitive form than the fairy tale. It is in the legend that the single motif is born, and the whole concern of the legend is directed towards such a motif. The gloominess, intensity, and inner tension connected with such a coming into existence impress their stamp on the vivid legend narrative. The fairy tale takes the available motif and plays with it, whereby the motif loses its original power and breath. The sacrilegious powers are sucked out from the basic motif of the main story in our example. Heathen fetishism and the Christian belief in God, which in the legend pitch there whole primeval explosive power against each other, now get along peacefully. In addition, at the end of the fairy tale a kind of anti-fairy tale is added in an effective manner. This anti-tale contrasts with the main fairy tale, and its contents are closer to the legend. The impious queen is only able to utter curses instead of prayers, and she offends God in the manner of the herdsmen in the legend. But instead of the dreadful judgment, the fairy tale presents the bare failure. Here too, the motif has lost a part of its importance. Now it may be linked with other motifs into a graceful chain.

However, the principal goal of this paper is not to show that the legend does not presuppose any previous narration and that the fairy tale is dependent on motifs already existing, but rather to elucidate the different nature of the two genres. The fairy tale and the legend live side by side. The fairy tale, although presupposing the legend, being fed by it, does not supplant it. Each one of these forms corresponds to another spiritual need and, therefore, they cannot replace or succeed each other.

In the legend, the world obtrudes upon man, the external world as well as his own inner world. Man confronts both of them, and they in turn, meet and permeate each other. Whereas the legend expresses such encounters directly, the fairy tale moves things into a redeeming distance. In the place of the Alpine hut it presents the king's palace; instead of the three herdsmen, the princess. The individual takes the place of a group of differentiated individuals. The individual is by nature more conspicuous and distinct than the group and is futhermore transferred from the real, everyday world into an isolating distance by being elevated into a radiant, royal sphere. The legend gives an oppressively close view; the fairy tale allows the free perspective of action which, carried by sharply outlined, radiant figures, yields a self-contained, meaningful totality. Both the oppressing, disturbing, and close partial view of the legend, and the harmonizing and delivering perspective and view of the fairy tale, are indispensable to man. In principle, both are eternal categories. That legend and fairy tale move along side by side through the ages, sharply separated by their styles, is not surprising.

Mixed forms, of course, are also found. But most of the tales gravitate toward a pure style, assigning them to one genre or the other. Two examples may elucidate this: Is the tale of "Tom-Tit-Tot"[16] a legend or fairy tale? And should we speak about a Polyphemus legend or a Polyphemus fairy tale?[17] The answer is simple: both exist, the legend as well as the fairy tale. Originally, both the one-eyed giant who does not know the real name of his tormentor and the gay dwarf who discloses his name belong to the legend. The "nobody" or "myself" tale is a known legend. The atmosphere of the legend, which is close to reality, is still felt in Homer. The scene is set in a cave.

Polyphemus and the other Cyclopes, true, are giants, but giants that resemble humans; and both giants and humans appear as a community. As soon as the motif appears in the fairy tale, its traits change. Instead of the cave, there is a "magnificent castle," empty of humans, with marble stairs and a row of splendid rooms, a hall with a table full of savory dishes; the large herd is accommodated in a large outer court. In place of the Cyclopes we see only **one** monstrous, blind dragon; instead of the company of sailors, there are three brothers. Finally, only one of them, the hero of the tale, is able to escape and save himself. The whole tale is only an episode within the framework of a long story, a step already made by Homer.[18]

A glittering castle, rising abruptly from a plain, a castle as isolated as the figures of this-worldly or other-worldly characters, contrasts with a cave which is part of the landscape and with giants that are members of a living community. The castle, an ideal construct produced by the intellect, belongs to a remote, high sphere; it has sharp delineations and is an entirety in itself. The cave is shapeless, without tangible, sharp boundries, and it leads into the depths of the earth to the undefined. Whoever wants to explore the secrets of the earth, of the existing reality, enters caves; he who commits himself to creative imagination, builds castles. Castle and cave are expressive symbols for the fairy tale and legend in general.

The Tom-Tit-Tot of the legend dwells in a mountain cave, that of the fairy tale in a "small house" (Grimms' version). The latter breaks himself asunder; the mountain gnome of the legend simply disappears from the valley. In the fairy tale there is an abrupt

termination; in the legend, a vanishing into the undefined.

> A mountain gnome fell in love with a fair lass in the valley. He visited her more often than she liked. Finally, the suitor became aware of this fact. He said to her that if she knew his name at his next visit, he would not come any more. But if she did not know his name, she had to become his wife. The clever girl tied a long thread to one of her suitor's legs without his being aware of it and followed him secretly when he went away. When the gnome reached his cave he sang:
>
> Ah, little wheel-spin!
> Ah, little reel-wind!
> Ah, thank God
> That my sweetheart does not know
> That **Hans-Ofeli-Chächeli** I am called!
>
> The girl hurried home. The suitor returned after a few days. Now the girl had to tell his name. She guessed this and that, as if she did not know anything. At last she said that he probably was called **Hans-Ofeli-Chächeli.** The gnome became scared, stamped with his feet and shouted: "This was told to you by the devil!" and hurried away, to return to the valley no more.[19]

Once again, the legend works around the single motif and cannot get away from it, while the fairy tale uses it as a stepping-stone to wider action. The legend explicates the emotional relationship of the other-worldly being to man: the dwarf loves the girl. In contrast, the fairy tale has only a coarse picture. The gnome wants the girl's child. The connection of the human to the creature remains vague in the legend; in the fairy tale it is definitely fixed and motivated in the course of action. In the fairy tale, the discovery of the name comes abruptly on the third day (Grimms' version). In the legend, it is not by chance: the girl gropes her way cautiously to the mysterious reality [of the legend]. Thus, each of the two narratives forms itself according to the laws of its

genre. Grimms' Tom-Tit-Tot is by no means a stylized legend, but a real fairy tale. It is indeed possible to spin out and to embellish the naked and dry story of **Hans-Ofeli-Chächeli** without making it thereby into a fairy tale, as is proved by the nice retelling of the story by Curt Englert-Faye.[20]

Scholars in the history of religion believe that the origin of the fairy tale can be traced to ecstatic experiences. Otto Huth sees in them the megalithic mystery legend in which initiation processes are translated into words.[21] The style of the fairy tale does allow for this possibility. In the fairy tale, things seem to be sublimated into pure figures, the whole is dipped into light and splendor. All earthly weight, all self-concern is dropped. Man moves beyond his self and subjects himself completely to the display of the fairy tale pictures. These pictures are not permeated by emotions and by relations to reality. Therefore, they are pure pictures, and are apt to carry man (for whom they were created) away from himself and to elevate him to rapture and ecstasy. Whoever has watched the look of children listening to a fairy tale--which was perhaps only read to them--knows the meaning of this "being beyond himself." Ecstasy is not an uneasy flickering, but a sure and reassuring radiation.

The legend leads us away neither from ourselves nor from the world. It entangles and binds us to entities in and around us which are difficult to grasp; it leads us deeper into the world, a world the outlines of which fade to both inner and outer directions. The legend makes the world inside us and the world outside us flow into each other; it deepens and heightens experience. The legend disturbs; the fairy tale moves us beyond reality. In the legend familiar

realities receive another, awful face. Not only the animation of the doll but also its dreadful, slow swelling are proof. The fairy tale, in contrast, does not distort its entities but changes them by enchantment. Tools are golden, a person is a king or princess (and what enrapturing power both conceptions have over man still today!). In place of concrete individuality and reality there are extremely well-shaped gestures, actions, and figures, the lustrous beauty being only a prominent example for it. The legend arises from the overwhelming encounter between the inner world and the world around. In the encounter immeasurable depths of the two worlds may suddenly open to man. Legends have arisen and are still arising everywhere among people. The fairy tale, however, seems indeed to be a creation of the "initiated," a picture-like view of essential processes of the mind, the soul, and the cosmos. Entities lifted from reality into this sphere become transparent, weightless, and fit easily into a whole. It is quite possible that the proto-fairy tale represented experiences of initiation or told about the "journey to the other world." One should, however, not limit the conception of the fairy tale only to the other world and to the sacred marriage. The proto-fairy tale may have originated in initiation rites or in ecstatic experiences; but once the [literary] form which removes the audience from reality was found, it was able to incorporate other, new substances and to create new tales after the same pattern. It is neither the isolated motifs nor exclusively the sequence of motifs in a tale which determine whether it should be classified as a fairy tale or not, but, to a high degree, its style. Style reassures the listener, offers him clarity and relief. The style of the legend provokes melancholy brooding and a groping

into mysterious reality. Both forms are as necessary to man as inhaling and exhaling. "The former oppresses, the latter refreshes. . . ." (Goethe).

The style of a genre is more distinctive than the national style or the style of an historical period. Any people relates its fairy tales in a manner a little different from its neighbors. At the initiative of Friedrich Ranke, Elisabeth Koechlin has carefully investigated such national differences.[22] Every narrator has his own style of narrating, and attentive collectors (Jahn, Henssen, Uffer, and others) have informed us about it. But these individual and national styles bring only slight changes and do not break up the style of the genre. The style of an historical period adapts to the style of the genre as well. Fairy tales of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries adhere clearly to the fundamental characteristics of the genre style even if they went through the hands of editors who were very much indebted to the style of their time (Baroque: Basile; Classicism: Perrault; Romanticism: Grimm). A baroque and a classical fairy tale are incomparably closer (in style) to each other than a fairy tale and a legend of the same period. This fact is not self-evident, for the genres of fairy tale and legend are closely related. Both are short narrative forms having a common stock of motifs and contents. The fact that the two genres are so neatly differentiated through the ages demonstates the inner necessity of even the lighter shades of differences between them. The different character of the two genres is due to the needs of the mind which are fundamentally equal at all times and for all peoples. It must be investigated whether and how the typical contrast between legend and fairy tale, which may be under-

stood as two fundamental categories of narrative poetry, is also found in the confines of belles lettres.

NOTES

1 Josef MÜller, **Sagen aus Uri** vol. 2 (Basel, 1929) No. 879.

2 Irene Naumann-Mavrogordato, **Es war Einmal. Neugriechische Volksmärchen** (Istanbul, 1942), p. 5. See also Paul Kretschmer, **Neugriechische Märchen** (Jena, 1919), no. 53 (The sugar-man), and Giambattista Basile, **Pentamerone** No. 43 (Pintosmalto).

3 Müller No.874[2], compare Nos. 872[2], 874[1], 875[1], 880[1], 881[1], 882; in others the doll is male, called Hausäli= Hanseli (Johny) and joins in playing cards (Müller No.878[1]).

4 Müller No. 871, 880[2,3]; similar in Saaneland. See M. Sooder, "Zur Sage vom Sennentunsch," **Der Kleine Bund** (Bern), March 10, 1946.

5 Müller, No. 872[1]. [This is the term for the place set apart in the house for the image of a saint and for prayer. trans. note].

6 Müller, No. 874.

7 Müller, No. 878.

8 Müller, No. 874[2].

9 Müller, No. 872[1]; compare Nos. 873, 875[1].

10 Müller, No. 878[1].

11 Müller, No. 881[1].

12 Müller, No. 886; compare No. 888.

13 In almost all versions.

14 Müller, No. 872[2]; compare above p. 2, note 1.

15 Müller, No. 871[1], 873.

16 The Grimms' tale No. 55: "Rumpelstilzchen," A. Aarne and S. Thompson, **The types of the Folktale** (Helsinki, 1961), Type 500 [trans. note].

17 Ibid., Type 1137 [trans. note].

18 "Georg und die Störche, ein Märchen der Ipsarioten," told by L. Ross in **Blätter fur literarische Unterhaltung** 1835, No. 10/12. Here the question about the name is missing. Similarly in a Latvian fairy tale [**Europäische Volksmärchen** (Zürich, 1951), p. 350. **Lettisch-Litauische Märchen** (Jena, 1924), p. 136.]: A prince enters a "beautiful castle." "He enters one room which is empty; he enters a second room which is full of sheep (!), and in their midst there is one big sheep; he enters a third room which is almost filled by a single fish. The tail of the fish is at the door on one side of the room and its head at the other side of the room, the body stretching over the whole room. The fish has eyes as large as a sieve. The prince draws swiftly his sword and pierces the eyes of the fish. At once the fish transforms into a huge iron (!) giant. He gropes at the prince and tries to catch him. The prince hides among the sheep. The large sheep is friendly to the fleeing prince and whispers to him: 'Hide under my belly and the blind iron giant will not be able to catch you. Once, we were human beings, but there, on the other island, we became sheep.' The prince escapes under the belly of the sheep and reaches his ship. The iron giant hears the noise of the ship and throws stones at it. Every stone which falls upon the ship becomes a golden nugget, but whosoever tries to take it becomes dumb."

That is certainly an instructive example for the change of form of a sequel of motifs which grows from the legend into the fairy tale.

19 Otto Henne-Am Rhyn, **Die deutsche Volkssage** 2nd ed. 1879, p. 288.

20 **Vo chlyne Lüte** (St. Gallen, 1937), p. 127.

21 Otto Huth, "Märchen und Megalithreligion," **Paideuma** 5(1950). To the perception of the fairy tale as initiation

transferred into the sphere of imagination, compare Mircea Eliade, "Les savants et les contes de fees," **Nouvelle Revue Française** 3(1956): 884-891.

22 Elisabeth Köchlin, **Wesenszüge des deutschen und des französischen Volksmärchens.** Eine vergleichende Studie zum Märchentypus von 'Amor und Psyche' und vom 'Tierbräutigam' (Basel, 1945).