

# The Narration of Folk Fairy-Tale within the Therapeutic Workshop

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## **Abstract**

The individuation of some outstanding qualities of the popular story, the fairy tale, it is described, for its figuration, rhythm, repetition distance, lack of truthfulness as fit for the so called atelier-comte with groups of children in order to serve as a symbolical mediator of non verbal psychic elements, that the activities of narration, drawing, play will succeed in bringing back for a present and direct processing.

**Key Words:** atelier-comte, symbolical mediator, narration, drawing, play.

The contribution of the psychoanalytical theory and practice, beyond the medical field in which it originated, has allowed us to get a new understanding of historical events. There are well-known psychoanalytical interpretations of historical events, works of art, religions, novels and folk fairy-tales.

Notwithstanding Freud's pioneering works ("Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis", "The Uncanny") and Bettelheim's famous meta-psychological study ("The Enchanted World"), the fairy tale as a mediating object does not seem to have been often used within the therapeutic context; this has meant renouncing its considerable potentiality to give rise to predictable secondary working-through traceable in what we may call the collective unconscious, in the sense of "a group" rather than in the Jungian sense.

I would like to share the experience I have gained with such a mediating object: it concerns the context of therapeutic workshops which I have carried out for 30 years with autistic and psychotic children-patients in a day hospital, and children with neurotic disorders who used to come to the surgery for daily therapy.

The folk fairy-tale is not therapeutic in itself, but the way in which therapists will involve themselves in it, work it through and use it, in order to receive and detoxify pathological or normal anxieties which emerge in children, makes it an essential tool for those who have to treat severe illnesses.

Why, then, the fairy tale of oral tradition within therapeutic settings?

## **a) Archaic Elements in Tales of Oral Tradition**

Fairy-tales are narratives full of archaic forms which originated in the collective unconscious of the so-called primitive societies and have been evolving ever since prehistory: these are well-structured tales which can be found within the themes of the international classification of fairy tales (Aarne – Thomson) and thus are mutually comparable in the production of geographically far-away civilisations. What is addressed in these stories are the existential problems common to children

and adults. These stories can be easily memorized and passed on thanks to their richness in images and powerful poetical appeal.

Our clinical practice is marked by three phases which have become classic: narration, role playing, drawings (or the group of word-associations for older children). Thus, with some experienced therapists, the fairy tale within a workshop becomes sort of “mother in a state of maternal reverie” in the Bionic sense. It receives and contains acting-out, things per se, bizarre, archaic things such as violence and destruction related to the maturation of erogenous zones in their conscious and unconscious representations. The therapists’ work, through such a mediating object, consists of receiving the archaic elements, selecting them, detoxifying them, limiting them as much as possible and inserting them into categories of recognised and shared emotions, into attitudes and behaviour which are acceptable to the life of the group.

Within treatment, the relationship with the fairy-tale is also a good anti-depressant exercise for the therapist himself, which is interesting in our age marked by a lack of experienced professionals and a return to emotion-deadening drugs. In our experience of support for parents, this therapeutic recommendation activates minor resistance in comparison with the other psychotherapeutic and rehabilitative techniques which are usually proposed. The parallel parental group is a remarkable tool for working through the inter-phantalisation of the family as revealed by these stories which the parents have already inhabited with their healthy infantile parts.

Folk fairy-tales are narratives which have been passed on by word of mouth since the dawn of time. They were used, like myths and religions, in order to make sense of the existential problems which human beings were faced with. Freud hypothesised the analogy between the maturation of the individual and that of mankind: this idea is often found also in other researchers, such as Propp for instance. This fact leads us to think that the archaic elements of thought present in fairy-tales – devouring/being devoured, being abandoned, getting lost in the forest, being attacked by wild beasts, coping with maternal images either destructive (witches) or too overidealized (fairy queens) – echo the most hidden anxieties of children and adults who listen to them. We may then technically locate these anxieties, anticipate them, symbolically highlight the points which organise the meaning (for instance binary opposites such as inside/outside, open/closed, attacker/attacked), and over-signify their effects.

The technique consisting of symbolically “marking down” certain sequences, which organise representations within space and thought; this allows to create key-situations which will act as actual “positive screen-memories” (Freud: “Neurosis and Psychosis”, 1899) very useful to those confused disorders devoid of any secondary working-through, which might potentially be understood by children with a minor neurotic structure. It is necessary for the adults/children work-group to use the standard phases of the fairy-tale workshop (narration, dramatisation, drawing and word) in order to receive the weirdest projections and make them thinkable

within a space of theatricalization according to Bion's proposal: transformation of bizarre beta-elements into alpha-elements which are thinkable and organised within a narrative "ready made" in the oral history of all human societies. The choice of fairy-tales allows us to define the representations of the conflicts we want to face with the group and which concern experiences of growth.

The child's maturation needs a basic "corpus" and a good knowledge of traditional fairy-tales in order to accompany his/her associations in relation to such narratives, whatever the technique we use: drawings, puppets, plasticine, dramatization, music, cartoons, and, for teenagers and adults, psychodrama (either Morenian or psychoanalytical), video-drama, creative writing courses and so on.

### **b) The Structure of Narration in Fairy-Tales belonging to the Oral Tradition**

In his morphological analysis of Russian fairy-tales ("Morphology of Fairy-Tales"), V. Propp demonstrated that these fairy-tales (and probably those of all countries) develop within the limit of 31 functions. For logical and aesthetic reasons, each function is derived from the previous one. A great number of functions are assembled in couples (interdiction/transgression, interrogation/information, struggle/victory, night/day, attacker/attacked etc.). The dependence of the agents, who are subordinated by the constraints of their function, forms a chain of invariants which the narrator cannot disregard; the attacker attacks, the hero is victorious and the wicked character gets punished! At least everything is clear and it creates no confusion to autistic and psychotic children and to those without any environmental holding. These invariants and constraints, established through a diachronic organisation, start from an initial defective, lacking situation followed by a course of events which dramatise scenarios close to the basic conflicts of family life and eventually arrive at a final event or situation, of general atonement and a return to a state of equilibrium. We all know how famous Propp's book is. Levy-Strauss took from it the idea of Structuralism. Much research on the semiotics of narratives (Greimas, Courtès, Belmond in France) emanated from fairy-tales of oral tradition.

It is interesting to compare the reactions of "normal" children's pleasure, all through their maturation, with those (often very confused) of autistic and psychotic ones when experiencing this Meccano/fairy tale (the word is taken from Belmond). Children without any pathology will already have internalised, according to their age, the metaphorical unconscious shifts caused by these tales of oral tradition. The psychotic ones who, as is well-known, have difficulties with displacement processes, get an un hoped-for access to a codified model of representations with rhythms, invariants, links, reference points to hold onto when lost in the confusing mist of the psychotic thinking. This is neither an educational nor a behavioural model. It is a standard structure which acts as a support for the possibility of representing thoughts and perhaps internalising archaic elements and growth anxieties through solutions which are acceptable to the reference group. For example, in the tale of Red Riding Hood the structure of the narration is fixed and

the child who listens to it always expects it to be that way: the little girl meets the wolf in the forest, talks to him but does not recognise him as an attacker, unless he is in bed inside the house, disguised as the grandmother whom he has just devoured. Such diachrony, which derives from the enunciation of the chosen fairy tale, cannot be modified. If the wolf devoured the little girl whom he has just met in the forest, it would be a completely different story, which one may wish to invent but it is not the tale predicted in the telling. The restraining force of this type of narration is reassuring and has an organising function for the child who lacks points of reference. The repeated telling of the tales will help them to internalise the links and at the end of a certain working time, he will be able to take possession of an associative capacity unknown to that moment.

### **c) The Family Group in the Folk Fairy Tale**

Fairy-tales do not deal with reality-like families but, according to an amusing expression of Kaes, it is about “The family of the inner factory” (Conte et divan,1996). Let us consider the initial situation of Little Thumb and Hansel and Gretel; children who get lost in the forest (fairy tale type 327 A in the international classification).

Psychotic children who are told these two tales often say: “You are telling the same story”. At the beginning we thought. “ They are psychotic, which means confused, they mistake things”. Nothing of the kind. By looking at the international classification, we realised that they had individuated the initial situation, common to both stories,: the phantasm of being abandoned, the harsh reality of having to get by on their own, thus becoming independent in the forest of fairy-tales where one gets lost and systematically come across the attacker.

The formula “Once upon a time” proposes a category, the fictional narrative, which supports the notion of a mental space for the phantasm, different from reality or delirium. Surrealism claimed that the magical fairy tales were a sort of safety net against delirium. Such an idea has been confirmed by our 30-year-long experience, during which we have used this mediating object. None of the psychotic children who benefited from our workshops (though they also received other types of therapy) has ever developed delirium, which could have hindered the kind of socialisation, often protected, accorded them by their encysted psychosis. These traditional tales deal with phantasmal life and are easily recognised by normal children as “not true, but thinkable” because they are stories which do not occur in real life: daring to abandon one’s child (Little Thumb), or sending one’s daughter (Red Riding Hood) into the forest where there might be a wolf likely to attack her! If sequences such as these taken from folk tales occurred in everyday life they would certainly be referred to a criminal judge. The parental figures present in such tales are imaginary, always unfair, destructive, mistreating or absent: such parental images of the phantasmal projections paradoxically facilitate the possibility of parents, who have been put under supervision by a judge, of facing the theme of maltreatment of their children. In effect they often say: “These stories are much

worse than what we get the blame for” and it makes it easier for them to talk about it.

What is represented in the tales are the extremes of binary opposites. The good mother is always dead and well replaced by a fairy-godmother, while the wicked mother is a jealous stepmother or a persecuting witch who devours children, and is always severely punished in the final scenes. Kaes (1996) has given great value to the fairy tales because of their potential “ready-made” contents of possibilities for thinking. The family which will be worked upon, in the play or in the picture, is the “inner family”, the one which will develop through the identification with the hero. The hero shows the way and on his path he meets the attacker.

The binary opposite, attacker/attacked is easily recognised by the confused child. The character of the unfair father, ageing, subdued and absent and the obsolete character of the old king allow children with a common neurosis to elaborate all the Oedipal projections around the image of the post-oedipal father. Fairy tales deal with minimally containing parents, with brotherly rivalry and independence to be achieved etc. The references that they propose produce good knowledge and representations of them are easy to recognise and are confirmed particularly through pictures, when these are appealing and of good quality.

#### **d) The Excellent Representational Capacity of Pictures in Fairy Tales**

Freud had already paved the way by drawing a comparative analysis of the qualities of dreams and fairy tales. In both cases there is shift, condensation, censorship and a great representational capacity of the pictures. What we are interested in is the powerful potential of pictures in folk fairy tales (nowadays video pictures, TV pictures and advertisements have a lasting effect on children’s and adults’ daily life). Fairy tales have always inspired illustrators, and children, even before being able to read, show their interest by pointing out with their fingers those pictures talking with them.

In the workshop, the little houses of T124 (The Three Little Pigs) are an interesting illustration of Anzieu’s I-Skin. The children’s game and their drawings hint at protection and containment concepts and are full of information helpful to those who cannot build for themselves any effective protective envelop or any erogenous zone which might be metaphorized into containers of thoughts useful for group communication. Finally, this potential representation, expressed through pictures, has inspired artistic productions in fields such as dance, cinema, music and theatre: these forms of art have contributed to the spread of such potential through the mass media and show business. Walt Disney, before World War II, was an important promoter of the revival of fairy tales. In our technique of the therapeutic fairy tale workshop, pictures, drawings and dramatisation may symbolically mark the validity of Freud’s hypothesis relating the concept of “memory-screen”.

#### **e) Secondary Working-Through and the Folk Fairy Tale within Treatment**

From Charcot onwards, the process carried out by the psychic apparatus when about to master the tension in the conflict of drives is called psychic working-through. Such working-through needs scenarios of representation in order to avoid the acting-out caused by symptoms or crises which he described when analysing hysterical women. Freud, who studied with Charcot, noted that if we want to relate a dream to an interlocutor and want to be understood, we are forced to do it through the form of an oral narrative which requires psychic working-through. In the hysterical woman who “somatizes”, there would not be any psychic working-through. The secondary working-through (it was so defined by Freud when speaking about dream in 1914) is a sort of rearrangement useful to present the (often strange) dream in the form of a relatively coherent tale, so that it may be conveyed and understood. The necessarily chosen secondary working-through, he added, censors in order for a better understanding on the listener’s part.

It is interesting for therapists to know the environmental parameters which affect, either consciously or unconsciously, both the minor modifications which the narrator feels free to add to the basic structure and the secondary working through of children and adults invited to associate and to create during therapeutic stages complementary to this type of work (playing, drawing, word etc). Essential are the contaminations, additions, infiltrations and, most of all, the associations encountered.

One must be able to receive and work them through by getting to know the family context and the real or imaginary traumas as recalled by the group or by that particular child. The contaminations which aggregate, coming from Tv pictures or video-games, require *savoir faire* which must be differentiated from the usual censorship within the educational setting. My personal experience of narration in the fairy tale and dramatisation workshop is identical to that of many educationists. (Adam: *Le Récit*, PUF, 1984). Children under 6 years of age are unable to work through a well structured narrative with an initial setting, a development and a conclusion and, at the same time, take into account the emotional response of the listener. Psychotic children will only be able to do it later and some of them never will, such is their tendency to reduce to apparently incoherent fragments the confused tales which they are able to produce within their inner universe, always very chaotic and anguished.

On the basis of my experience (seminars and *inter-visions*<sup>1</sup>) I am able to talk of the organising function of the fairy tale. By using a well adapted technique, consisting of admitting “controlled free associations”, it seemed to me that our modes of marking the sequences depicting the conflicts of the collective unconscious, function as a real stimulation to organise positive “screen-memories” within the diachrony of the settings. Such memories facilitate thinking and displacement (which were unknown up to that moment) for children confused by autism and psychosis, but also for those lacking the containment of a reassuring family

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<sup>1</sup>A sort of supervision between three or four people.

environment. One sees these children becoming interested in a progressively playful way, and then using representations of scenarios, appealing for their clarity and poetry. These experiences of the phantasmal life in a group of adults/children allow a positive prospective anticipation regarding real or imaginary traumas impossible to remove and devoid of any representations up to that moment.

Through this mediating object we get to a particularly interesting point: the work that the group will carry out with its capacity of recycling, and reusing the experience of facing archaic anxieties dealt with in the chosen tale.

Magical fairy tales can act as good “grafts” for representing and thinking about conflicts of orality, (the Wolf, Eeny the Ogre are interesting archetypes), anality and, at a lower level, genitality, (the latter one being rather within the domain of burlesque tales).

How can we propose, within the institutional group, complementary workshops (such as narration, creative writing, puppets, Morenian or psychoanalytical psychodrama, musical expression, dance etc) in order to favour the re-usage or the recycling of the internalisation of conflicts worked through by the fairy tale?

Many difficult sessions of individual psychotherapy, with attacks on the setting, have been handled by psychotherapists, capable of containing the situation as they knew the analogical representation of the destructive projective identification, within the session using fairy tales. Working through the meaning in a narrative, which has already been worked through by a group, may help a child use the category of what is thinkable and representable. “Make-believe” and pretending to be violent, situations present in certain fairy tales, have proven useful in allowing the presence and then detoxification of difficult moments, which can then prevent acting-out, thus avoiding the interruption of the session. In extreme cases like these, in order to carry on thinking together, alluding to a fairy tale has an interpretative value and is more easily accepted by the child, when relating an object “outside of him”, rather than the transference analysis.

To have “containers of thoughts” in situations of anxiety is always more comforting than the absence of representation or any acting-out.

#### **f) The Group Dimension and the Fairy Tale Workshop**

The fairy tale belongs to a social group. It speaks to the infantile part, both the child’s and the adult’s. The fairy tale is read and understood within a group, staged within a group and the drawings are elaborated within a group. The psycho-dramatic play or role play, derived from the fairy tale workshop, allows the child to use the structure in order to speak about him/herself, freely associate in a group, use the group as a mirror, use the receiving, detoxifying and containing function of the adults within the group (if they have been trained in these techniques). The fairy-tale is less constraining than individual therapy, for certain disadvantaged children, as we are in the domain of the phantasmal, of the untrue, of the magical and of playing, and it makes parents feel less guilty: “because we know what fairy tales deal with” they often say.

Depending on the therapists' experience there will be some theoretical problems: closed group, open group, complementary groups like "Chinese boxes", parallel groups of parents in order to stimulate a work of *inter-phantalisation* between the two groups?

It has been said that the fairy tale is perfect in its potentialities, imperfect in its realisations: it is then a mediating object, which opens out all kinds of creative possibilities. It requires a mental relationship between the narrator and the listeners and vice versa. This is group-work and for the therapists it sometimes entails trans-generational work on the absence or presence of traditional fairy tales in the paternal or maternal lineage according to the participants' regional or ethnic origins. Those who use it say that the narrative of it in the workshop is a mediating object rich in potentialities and an anti-depressant stimulus for therapists dealing with those patients who produce emptiness, anxiety, chaos in the thoughts of those near them.

### **Bibliography:**

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