FAIRY TALE ARCHITECTURES AND THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY PALACE

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ABSTRACT: My paper discusses the ways in which fairy tale may be viewed as allegory for human psychological conflict and construction of personality. Ideas focused on include: our feeling of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’; body-environment dependence of thought and memory; metaphor, the nature of ‘consciousness’ and personality: the construction of the individual memory palace, and the construction of what we may term the ‘collective’ memory palace; the human disavowal of creatureliness, and of the human body as primary reality; self-worth and the concept of the hero. My conclusions seek to show how fairy tale informs us subversively about our conflicted humanity, why we form allegiances in the way we do, and the story of the hero inevitably captivates us.

Knowing takes place inside being, but it is the strange paradox of human life that being takes place inside knowing, and does so specifically by assuming the structure of a narrative, a division into subject and predicate with knowing as protagonist. Of this protagonist, neurologist Antonio Damasio writes:

*You* exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then; as long as primordial stories are being told, and only then. ‘You are the music while the music lasts’ (T.S. Eliot ‘Dry Salvages’). (Damasio 1999, 191)

Of all stories with roots in the primordial, fairy stories are for me the most distinctive and curious. I want to examine the process by which we as mental beings come to exist: how do we discover ourselves as the music, and what sentiment does that music express? Above all, in what sense can the structure of fairy tales be seen as a blueprint of this process? Unlike commentators such as Sheldon Cashdan, Alice Miller, and Bruno Bettelheim, I shall not interpret fairy tales as aids to dealing with psychological conflict, or as moral lessons. Though the insights of these commentators have been invaluable, I believe fairy stories inspire deep analyses because, even more tellingly than myths, fairy stories recount what it feels like to be a human child, discovering oneself as a creature, in possession of a creature body, what that discovery ultimately means, and what can be done about it. Children love fairy stories not because of any edifying moral lessons the stories convey, but because fairy stories express feelings children experience often secretly, even unconsciously, may be ashamed of, or threatened by – feelings the adult world refuses to acknowledge, and has set up vast cultural networks to suppress and avoid. Like the youth who went forth to learn what fear was, fairy stories venture into primordial places the adult world will not. As Cashdan and Bettelheim point out, the stories allow children to confront life’s demons and overcome them.
My PhD thesis involves an examination of the illustrative work of Mervyn Peake. One of the fairy tales Peake illustrated was *Our Lady’s Child*, in which a little girl is given by her impoverished father into the care of the Virgin Mary, who takes her to heaven and entrusts to her the keys to thirteen doors, twelve of which she may open, but the thirteenth she must not. Overcome by desire to know the secret behind the thirteenth door, she gives into temptation and discovers the holy Trinity sitting in fire and splendour. She touches the light with her finger, which becomes dipped in gold, refusing to wash clean. When the Virgin Mary asks for her keys back, she discovers the girl’s disobedience, evidenced by the gold finger. She reprimands her, puts her to sleep, and when the girl awakes, she is no longer in heaven, but in a dark forest, hedged by thorns. Peake depicts the lonely child confined in this wilderness, and he captures eloquently the identity of her prison: fleshly, corporeal, dendritic, womblike (Grimm 1946, 64). Betrayed first by a sin of uncleanness, of spiritual stain, unable to manage her body, the tiny heroine is now dwarfed, bewildered, engulfed by physicality.

Knowing takes place inside being, and, if we were to build a fairy story out of that metaphysical circumstance, it might be that one day, knowing peeps into the thirteenth room of the palace of being, and makes a frightful discovery: we all know what it sees there – fairy tales abound in representative images: the beast, the clammy frog, the blood-stained handkerchief. In a nutshell, knowing discovers the vulnerable, fleshly nature of being. Though golden, holy and precious, bits of it stick to your finger. Knowing is aghast and guilty at the horror it has stumbled on. In our story, overcome by feelings of loss, guilt and helplessness, knowing longs to protect fragile being from harm, and in despair, digs out the interior of itself to make a vault wherein the body of being can be laid to await hope of resurrection. It is the genesis of the biographical self.

Eventually of course the little girl in *Our Lady’s Child* earns forgiveness, and the tale ends happily, its moral predictable enough. The images likely to infiltrate our dreams, however, are of those strange heavenly rooms, each with an apostle sitting in it, the Virgin Mary with her big bunch of gaoler’s keys – what sort of heaven has so many locked doors? – the dirty finger dipped in gold, and the ‘poor little animal’ girl eating roots and wild berries, who, even as a rich and beautiful queen, will not attain acceptance in heaven until she proves her virtue and honesty: good both outside and in.

It is a tale of self-discovery and self-perception, suggesting different metaphors of personhood: the little girl in charge of many rooms – a palace – containing secret quarters she must not look into; the forest orphan, reduced to dumb animalhood after succumbing to forbidden pleasure; the queen in a royal castle, unjustly accused of eating her children; the prisoner at the stake, who finds repentance and reinstatement as a worthwhile human being.
As biographical selves, we are a library of memories, a storehouse: we might even think of it as a palace if our self-esteem were high, or as a dark forest hedged with thorns if very low. The self calls on memorabilia to create itself at every instant – at every instant born anew. Equally there exist cultural collective selves which do the same, storing identity in rituals, symbols, beliefs, fashions – what Richard Dawkins calls memes (Dawkins 1976, 192). The memory palace I refer to in the title of this paper is that created by the Method of Loci. But I also intend the term as a metaphor for an edifice inside each of us which through long process of addition, enlargement, accretion, becomes the locus for a feeling of primary worth. That can be the case for a culture too. Developing that interior locus is of course what childhood and growing up is all about. Education, the moral imperative, instilling of values, all seek as their end the forming up of a contributor to society. Without that edifice, without that edification, are we really human?

The formula of every fairy tale is that of St Paul when he told the Corinthians: ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.’ The original magic is always the magic of transmutation - base metal into indestructible gold; or that of transubstantiation, of the Eucharist, bread into body and wine into blood: ‘this do in remembrance of me’(1 Cor. 11:24). We underestimate the significance of memory palaces when we regard them as artful tricks practised by politicians and mentalists. Memory palaces house the dead. Entering their sacred precincts, we can command phantoms to rise, summon back loved ones who once comprised the joys, thoughts, experiences of a living present. Memory palaces, individual and collective, predestine us in a remembered future, reincarnate our ancestors inside us, resurrect the ‘goers before’ so that they may travel the path beside us. The west African Yoruba and Edo people call new-born boys ‘Father Has Returned’ and girls ‘Mother Has Returned’ (Koster, 66).

Souls in antiquity, arriving in the dreadful invisible underworld of Hades, drank from the river Lethe and so forgot their mortal lives. The name Lethe, anticipating Freud, meant ‘concealment’. For the Greeks, forgotten experiences remained extant: they were sequestered, isolated, banished, but not erased. Initiates in the Orphic mysteries were instructed to avoid the waters of Lethe and drink instead from the pool of Mnemosyne, the kindly goddess of memory who took pity and bestowed on human consciousness, through the aid of her nine daughters the Muses, the ability to memorialise, to create history, to commemorate heroic deeds.

The Method of Loci is a mnemonic system of association by place – location. Cicero attributed the system’s discovery to the Greek poet Simonides who, according to legend, was attending a large formal dinner party one night when he felt the need to take a breath of air. Whilst he strolled in the courtyard, the roof of the building collapsed, killing everyone inside. Simonides amazed investigators by identifying the guests’ mutilated remains
because he could recall their seating positions at table. By means of the Method of Loci, facts needing to be remembered are converted into a series of vivid, emotionally charged images, each of which is assigned a location upon a journey.

I now want to place the idea of the memory palace, an ‘internal’ representation of an exterior space, within the context of what philosopher David Chalmers of ANU refers to as ‘extended mind’ (Clark & Chalmers 1998), or ‘active externalism’, a concept of philosophy of mind which queries the traditional dividing line between mind and body/world. Mark Rowlands writes in The Philosopher and the Wolf:

Mental activities do not just take place inside our heads - they are not just brain processes. Rather, they also involve activities we do in the world . . . Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. . . demonstrated just how much processes of remembering and other mental activities had changed with the development of an external device for storing information. The outstanding natural memory of primitive cultures gradually withers away and we rely more and more on written language as a way of storing our memories. (Rowlands 2008, 30)

We access memories not in our minds, but with limbs and viscera. Many forms of psychotherapy have a basis in this reciprocal mind-body relationship. The world we see out there is a representation of the inner world. Our palaces of memory are as much outside of us as in. Music for its performer is recalled in the fingers, not as a sequence of muscle innervations, but as an act of imagination in which the keyboard occupies a mental space, and the intellect is wholly embodied.

Images attached to loci, like information on a slate or whiteboard, can easily be erased and replaced. You stock a memory palace like a refrigerator, with any variety of random goodies, and need only ensure the packaging of each is eye-catching, amusing, tempting, mouth-watering, or sufficiently incongruous and weird – even repulsive or obscene – to make it memorable.

Both fairy tales and memory palaces are journeys, tell stories, intend to surprise and astonish. But let’s return our focus to viewing the landscape of the fairy tale, or its architecture, as a projection of the voyager’s creation of a sense of self, the one who walks through that landscape, or the one who explores the exhibits in a memory palace. ‘Mankind’s common instinct for reality,’ wrote the American psychologist William James,
Not only does human knowing confine being to the form of a subject-predicate narrative, the resultant reality is fashioned very specifically in terms of an executive persona, an inside, implementing action on a stage, an outside. This specific interpretation of being arises because of the organisation of fantasies around an executive centre. You are the music while the music lasts. The story is manufactured in the form of images which knowing fantasises for itself using those portions of being deemed admissible and non-threatening. It does not use material from the thirteenth room. How we project the objectivity and introject the subjectivity we each believe we are interacting with is equally how we construct the interactive self.

In fairy tales, we witness the hero’s unconcealed narcissistic triumph. Fairy tales are, as in William Blake’s proverb, ‘crooked roads without improvement’. They are the revealing, even embarrassing, first drafts for the great saga – the great cultural collective saga – the chronicle of human victory over being’s ceasing to be, over what was contained in the thirteenth room. This is why fairy tales display similar plot components, like houses designed late at night by the same obsessive architect. Memory palaces on the other hand, are sophisticated, ‘clean, well-lighted’ places where habit dwells so comfortably it has its feet up on the furniture. They are the home we live in, the place we go to work. And what I have termed a ‘collective’ memory palace is the most sophisticated device of all, charged with the sacred responsibility of transmitting generation to generation the cultural ‘reality’, habit set in law and stone, icons mortality wouldn’t dare challenge.

At the heart of the fairy tale lies the image of the mother, the infant’s source of life, nourishment, love, warmth, contact. It is in relationship with the mother, as object of a mother’s affection and care, that the helpless child first conceives a sense of separate identity. So long as an infant’s needs are instantly gratified, unity reigns. As Freud puts it: ‘Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling – a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed inseparable connection of the ego with the external world’ (Freud 1930, 4). When gratification is delayed or disappoints, the infant experiences pain, frustration and discord. The image of the mother – the image of being – suffers division. The good parts – the fairy godmother parts – are introjected to build the infant’s rudimentary self. The parts arousing hostility are projected, cast out, and the painful, bad feeling associated with them becomes ‘resident evil’ in an external world. Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden calls this splitting ‘a boundary-creating mode of thought and therefore a part of an order generating (not yet a personal meaning-generating) process’ (Ogden 1986, 48).

In fairy tales, evil most often takes up residence in the figure of the witch. But she is precisely a creature of
terrible paradox because, like the well-known ambiguous figure-ground illusion of the young woman and hag, the witch is the good mother in disguise, implying that the good mother may well be a witch in disguise. Identifying a single universal myth, what he called the monomyth, mythologist Joseph Campbell laid bare the uniquely human obsession, what we might even call a monomania: ‘A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man’ (1993, 30).

The fairy tale hero or heroine crosses a threshold into a region where familiar things present as threat, or strange incongruous events happen. These are often random, or seemingly so. The child often finds herself utterly alone, like Snow White, or Our Lady’s Child. When a child hears a fairy tale, the dramatic action is mentally staged in a familiar setting: a back garden, kitchen, the local park or playground, a beach. This space will remain inwardly consistent, avoiding depersonalisation, and the space will remain consistent for each repeat reading of the tale. Children enjoy this consistency, insist on it, as is well known.

At focal points through the journey, disturbing images must be confronted. Like the wolf in the hallway of my memory palace, these produce anxiety, but only in the way of a funfair ride. In fact they serve to demonstrate mastery over anxiety. Incongruity threatens; a witch, whose character a child assembles out of bits of a neighbour and of a kindergarten teacher, jumps out from behind a laurel bush in the garden, and the child chuckles merrily at it all as a creation of fantasy. It is in fact one more version of the terror-management game peekaboo, in which the disappearance of mother inspires a moment of pure panic, converting to relief at her return. Anxiety is ‘housed’ in a familiar space, within a representation of the self, where it can be deliberately controlled, its excitement turned into satisfaction.

Compare this with advice from the Rhetorica Ad Herennium on devising a memory palace:

establish likenesses as striking as possible; . . . set up images that are not many or vague, but doing something; . . . assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness . . . dress some of them with crowns or purple cloaks, for example, so that the likeness may be more distinct to us; or . . . disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint.

The Method of Loci has also been called the Journey Method. The reason why images within the memory palace function to recall specific items to memory is because they have anxiety attached to them, converting to pleasure, and converting to a gain in self-esteem when the correct memory connection is made. The placing of unfamiliar objects in a familiar environment continually disrupts then reinforces the self’s sense of security. It is
a series of tests and trials, beloved of the monomyth, beloved also of fairy tales.

In *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown argued that history is a representation of the psychological development of the collective human individual. Just as each one of us suffers trauma, represses experiences too painful to be consciously admitted, yet must tolerate them in modified form as symptoms of neuroses, so humankind through historical time must do the same. Each of us inherits this collective memory palace. We are conducted through it at school, we shop inside it at Westfield. It determines our apperception, whilst externally we observe customs and traditions which stockpile as bricks, mortar and asphalt. Both will define the way in which we replicate as types of the sociocultural hero-self. Our allegiance will be automatic and unconscious, because we respond out of longing and need, allowing imagination to fixate among the loci of the world view which is currently on offer.

Knowing takes place inside being, but it is the strange paradox of human life that being takes place inside knowing. Once identified with the hero, mental life submits to ‘boundary-creating modes of thought’ which endure from infancy to old age. Like favourite threadbare clothes or old photographs, the customs, routines, superstitions that sustain our sense of self-esteem and security insulate, captivate, and keep us warm. As Rilke wrote:

. . .there remains for us yesterday's street
and the loyalty of a habit so much at ease
when it stayed with us that it moved in and never left. (Rilke 1987, 151)

We compensate for panic, dread and bewilderment through magical self-aggrandisement: the fable of the hero. Life’s randomness must somehow be rendered predictable, fate preventable, and the process of storytelling, of memorialising, of ensuring homeostasis in mental life, lets us weave an ordered vision in which each of us walks forth as the specially chosen hero. The dark, ancient house of fairy tale and the brightly lit halls of the collective memory palace offer shelter to the illusory hero-self, and help authenticate reality for a creature whose ultimate fear is that being taking place inside knowing sounds suspiciously like the definition of something which is only a dream.

REFERENCES


http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rhetorica_ad_Herennium/3*.html
