DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

THOUGHTS ON WORDS, WOMEN, PLACES

Ursula K. Le Guin

GROVE PRESS
New York

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT; OR, WHY ARE WE HUDDLING ABOUT THE CAMPFIRE?

(1979)

This talk was the last paper read at a three-day symposium on narrative held at the University of Chicago in 1979. Some of the obscurer bits of it are incorporations of and jokes about things read or said by other participants in the conference, the proceedings of which may be found in Critical Inquiry *(vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1980). I had bought my first and only pair of two-inch-heeled shoes, black French ones, to wear there, but I never dared put them on; there were so many Big Guns shooting at one another that it seemed unwise to try to increase my stature.*

It was a dark and stormy night
and Brigham Young and Brigham Old
sat around the campfire.
Tell us a story, old man!
And this is the story he told:

It was a dark and stormy night
and Brigham Young and Brigham Old
sat around the campfire.
Tell us a story, old man!
And this is the story he told:

It was a dark and stormy night
and Brigham Young and Pierre Menard, author of
the *Quixote*,
sat around the campfire,
which is not quite the way my Great-Aunt Betsy
told it
when we said Tell us another story!
Tell us, *au juste*, what happened!
And this is the story she told:

It was a dark and stormy night, in the otherwise unnoteworthy year 711 E.C. (Eskimo Calendar), and the great-aunt sat crouched at her typewriter, holding his hands out to it from time to time as if for warmth and swinging on a swing. He was a handsome boy of about eighteen, one of those men who suddenly excite your desire when you meet them in the street, and who leave you with a vague feeling of uneasiness and excited senses. On a plate beside the typewriter lay a slice of tomato. It was a flawless slice. It was a perfect slice of a perfect tomato. It is perfectly boring. I hold out my hands to the typewriter again, while swinging and showing my delicate limbs, and observe that the rows of keys are marked with all the letters of the English alphabet, and all the letters of the French alphabet minus accent marks, and all the letters of the Polish alphabet except the dark L. By striking these keys with the ends of my fingers or, conceivably, a small blunt instrument, the aging woman can create a flaw in the tomato. She did so at once. It was then a seriously, indeed a disgustingly flawed tomato, but it continued to be perfectly boring until eaten. She expires instantly in awful agony, of snakebite, flinging the window wide to get air. It is a dark and stormy night and the rain falling in on the typewriter keys writes a story in German about a great-aunt who went to a symposium on narrative and got eaten in the forest by a metabear. She writes the story while reading it with close attention, not sure what to expect, but collaborating hard, as if that was anything new; and this is the story I wrote:

It was a dark and stormy night
and Brigham al-Rashid sat around the campfire
with his wife
who was telling him a story in order to keep her head
on her shoulders,
and this is the story she told:

The *histoire* is the what
and the *discours* is the how
but what I want to know, Brigham,
is *le pourquoi*.
Why are we sitting here around the campfire?

Tell me a story, great-aunt,
so that I can sleep.
Tell me a story, Scheherazade,
so that you can live.
Tell me a story, my soul, animula, vagula, blandula,
little Being-Towards-Death,
for the word's the beginning of being
if not the middle or the end.

"A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end, that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it."[1]

But sequence grows difficult in the ignorance of what comes after the necessary or at least the usual consequent of living, that is, dying,

and also when the soul is confused by not unreasonable doubts of what comes after the next thing that happens, whatever that may be.

It gets dark and stormy when you look away from the campfire.

Tell me what you see in the fire, Lizzie, Lizzie Hexam,
down in the hollow by the flare!
I see storm and darkness, brother.
I see death and running water, brother.
I see loving-kindness, brother.
Is it all right to see that, teacher?
What would Alain Robbe-Grillet say?

Never mind what he says, Lizzie.
Frogs have a lot of trouble with the novel,
even though kissed right at the beginning by the
Princesse de Clèves;
maybe they do not want to look down and see Victor
Hugo glimmering *au fond du puits*.

Brigham, this is stupid stuff!
Tell us a story, old man,
or old woman as the case may be,
or old Tiresias, chirping like a cricket,
tell us a story with a proper end to it
instead of beginning again and again like this
and thereby achieving a muddle
which is not by nature after anything in particular
nor does it have anything consequent to it
but it just hangs there
placidly eating its tail.

In the Far West, where Brigham Young ended up and I started from, they tell stories about hoop snakes. When a hoop snake wants to get somewhere—whether because the hoop snake is after something, or because something is after the hoop snake—it takes its tail (which may or may not have rattles on it) into its mouth, thus forming itself into a hoop, and rolls. Jehovah enjoined snakes to crawl on their belly in the dust, but Jehovah was an Easterner. Rolling along, bowling along, is a lot quicker and more satisfying than crawling. But, for the hoop snakes with rattles, there is a drawback. They are venomous snakes, and when they bite their own tail they die, in awful agony, of snakebite. All progress has these hitches. I don't know what the moral is. It may be in the end safest to lie perfectly still without even crawling. Indeed it's certain that we shall all do so in the end, which has nothing else after it. But then no tracks are left in the dust, no lines drawn; the dark and stormy nights are all one with the sweet bright days, this moment of June—and you might as well never have lived at all. And the moral of *that* is, you have to form a circle to escape from the circle. Draw in a little closer around the campfire. If we could truly form a circle, joining the beginning and the end, we would, as another Greek remarked, not die. But never fear. We can't manage it no matter how we try. But still, very few things come nearer the real Hoop Trick than a good story.

There was a man who practiced at the Hoop Trick named Aneirin.

But let us have the footnotes first.

"We have to bear in mind that the *Gododdin* [and its associated lays] are not narrative poems. . . . Nowhere is there any attempt to give an account of what it was really all about."[2] I disagree with this comment and agree with the next one, which points out that the

work goes rolling and bowling all about what it is all about. "While some of these [early Welsh poems] will 'progress' in expected fashion from a beginning through a middle to an end, the normal structure is 'radial,' circling about, repeating and elaborating the central theme. It is all 'middle.' "[3]

This is the Gododdin; Aneirin sang it. [I]

Men went to Catraeth, keen their war-band. [VIII]
Pale mead their portion, it was poison.
Three hundred under orders to fight.
And after celebration, silence.

Men went to Catraeth at dawn: [X]
All their fears had been put to flight.
Three hundred clashed with ten thousand.

Men went to Catraeth at dawn: [XI]
Their high spirits lessened their lifespans.
They drank mead, gold and sweet, ensnaring;
For a year the minstrels were merry.

Three spears stain with blood [XVIII]
Fifty, five hundred.
Three hounds, three hundred:
Three stallions of war
From golden Eidin,
Three mailclad war-bands,
Three gold-collared kings.

Men went to Catraeth, they were renowned, [XXI]
Wine and mead from gold cups was their drink,
A year in noble ceremonial,
Three hundred and sixty-three gold-torqued men.
Of all those who charged, after too much drink,
But three won free through courage in strife:
Aeron's two warhounds and tough Cynan,
And myself, soaked in blood, for my song's sake.

My legs at full length [XLVIII]
In a house of earth.
A chain of iron
About both ankles,
Caused by mead, by horn,
By Catraeth's raiders.
I, not I, Aneirin,
Taliesin knows it,

Master of wordcraft,
Sang to Gododdin
Before the day dawned.

None walk the earth, no mother has borne [XLIX]
One so fair and strong, dark as iron.
From a war-band his bright blade saved me,
From a fell cell of earth he bore me,
From a place of death, from a harsh land,
Cenan fab Llywarch, bold, undaunted.

Many I lost of my true comrades. [LXI]
Of three hundred champions who charged to Catraeth,
It is tragic, but one man came back.

On Tuesday they donned their dark armour, [LXIX]
On Wednesday, bitter their meeting,
On Thursday, terms were agreed on,
On Friday, dead men without number,
On Saturday, fearless, they worked as one,
On Sunday, crimson blades were their lot,
On Monday, men were seen waist-deep in blood.
After defeat, the Gododdin say,
Before Madawg's tent on his return
There came but one man in a hundred.

Three hundred, gold-torqued, [XCI]
Warlike, well-trained,
Three hundred, haughty,
In harmony, armed.
Three hundred fierce steeds
Bore them to battle.
Three hounds, three hundred:
Tragic, no return.[4]

"I, not I, Aneirin"—"won free"—"for my song's sake." What is Aneirin telling us? Whether or not we allow that a story so muddled or all middle can be a narrative, or must be lyric or elegiac, but do classic Greek definitions fit Welsh Dark Ages traditions?—so, as Barbara Myerhoff pleaded, in all courtesy let us not argue about it at this point, only perhaps admitting that the spiral is probably the shortest way of getting through spacetime and is certainly an effective way to recount the *loss* of a battle—in any case, what is Aneirin trying to tell us? For all we know or shall ever know of the Battle of

Catraeth is what he tells us; and there is no doubt that he very much wanted us to know about it, to remember it. He says that he won free for his song's sake. He says that he survived, alone, or with Cynan and two others, or with Cenan—he seems to have survived in several different ways, also, which is very Welsh of him—he says that he survived in order to tell us about his friends who did not survive. But I am not sure whether he means by this that he must tell the story because he alone survived; or that he survived because he had the story to tell.

And now for quite another war. I am going to speak in many voices for a while. Novelists have this habit of ventriloquy.[5]

"The SS guards took pleasure in telling us that we had no chance of coming out alive, a point they emphasized with particular relish by insisting that after the war the rest of the world would not believe what had happened; there would be . . . no clear evidence" (a survivor of Dachau).

"Those caught were shot, but that did not keep Ringelblum and his friends from organizing a clandestine group whose job was to gather information for deposit in a secret archive (much of which survived). Here . . . survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts" (Des Pres).

"[In Treblinka] the dead were being unearthed and burned [by work squads], and soon the work squads too would go up in smoke. If that had come to pass, Treblinka would never have existed. The aim of the revolt was to ensure the memory of that place, and we know the story of Treblinka because forty survived" (Des Pres).

"I found it most difficult to stay alive, but I had to live, to give the world the story" (Glatstein, from Treblinka).

"Even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness" (Primo Levi, from Auschwitz).

"It is a man's way of leaving a trace, of telling people how he lived and died. . . . If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity" (Nadyezhda Mandelshtam).

"Conscience . . . is a social achievement. . . . on its historical level, it is the collective effort to come to terms with evil, to distill a moral knowledge equal to the problems at hand. . . . Existence at its boundary is intrinsically significant. . . . the struggle to live—merely surviving—is rooted in, and a manifestation of, the form-conferring potency of life itself" (Des Pres).

"We may at least speculate that . . . survival depends upon life

[considered] as a set of activities evolved through time in successful response to crises, the sole purpose of which is to keep going" (Des Pres).

"Living things act as they do because they are so organized as to take actions that prevent their dissolution into the surroundings" (J. Z. Young).

"It seems as if Western culture were making a prodigious effort of historiographic *anamnesis*. . . . We may say . . . this *anamnesis* continues the religious evaluation of memory and forgetfulness. To be sure, neither myths nor religious practices are any longer involved. But there is this common element: the importance of precise and total recollection. . . . The prose narrative, especially the novel, has taken the place of the recitation of myths. . . . The tale takes up and continues 'initiation' on the level of the imaginary. . . . Believing that he is merely amusing himself or escaping, the man of the modern societies still benefits from the imaginary initiation supplied by tales. . . . Today we are beginning to realize that what is called 'initiation' coexists with the human condition, that every existence is made up of an unbroken series of 'ordeals,' 'deaths,' and 'resurrections.' . . . Whatever the gravity of the present crisis of the novel, it is nonetheless true that the need to find one's way into 'foreign' universes and to follow the complications of a 'story' seems to be consubstantial with the human condition."[6]

"For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh. . . . In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June."[7]

Why are we huddling about the campfire? Why do we tell tales, or tales about tales—why do we bear witness, true or false? We may ask Aneirin or Primo Levi, we may ask Scheherazade or Virginia Woolf. Is it because we are so organized as to take actions that prevent our dissolution into the surroundings? I know a very short story that might illustrate this hypothesis. You will find it carved into a stone about three feet up from the floor of the north transept of Carlisle Cathedral in the north of England, not all that far from Catterick, which may have been Catraeth. It was carved in runes, one line of

runes, laboriously carved into the stone. A translation into English is posted up nearby in typescript under glass. Here is the whole story:

Tolfink carved these runes in this stone.

Well, this is pretty close to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's earliest form of historiography—notch-cutting. As a story, it does not really meet the requirement of Minimal Connexity. It doesn't have much beginning or end. The material was obdurate, and life is short. Yet I would say Tolfink was a reliable narrator. Tolfink bore witness at least to the existence of Tolfink, a human being unwilling to dissolve entirely into his surroundings.

It is time to end, an appropriate time for a ghost story. It was a dark and stormy night, and the man and the woman sat around the campfire in their tent out on the plains. They had killed the woman's husband and run away together. They had been going north across the plains for three days now. The man said, "We must be safe. There is no way the people of the tribe can track us." The woman said, "What's that noise?" They listened, and they both heard a scratching noise on the outside of the tent, low down, near the ground. "It's the wind blowing," the man said. The woman said, "It doesn't sound like the wind." They listened and heard the sound again, a scraping, louder, and higher up on the wall of the tent. The woman said, "Go and see what it is. It must be some animal." The man didn't want to go out. She said, "Are you afraid?" Now the scraping sound had got very loud, up almost over their heads. The man jumped up and went outside to look. There was enough light from the fire inside the tent that he could see what it was. It was a skull. It was rolling up the outside of the tent so that it could get in at the smokehole at the top. It was the skull of the man they had killed, the husband, but it had grown very big. It had been rolling after them over the plains all along and growing bigger as it rolled. The man shouted to the woman, and she came out of the tent, and they caught each other by the hand and ran. They ran into the darkness, and the skull rolled down the tent and rolled after them. It came faster and faster. They ran until they fell down in the darkness, and the skull caught up with them there. That was the end of them.

There may be some truth in that story, that tale, that discourse, that narrative, but there is no reliability in the telling of it. It was told you forty years later by the ten-year-old who heard it, along

with her great-aunt, by the campfire, on a dark and starry night in California; and though it is, I believe, a Plains Indian story, she heard it told in English by an anthropologist of German antecedents. But by remembering it he had made the story his; and insofar as I have remembered it, it is mine; and now, if you like it, it's yours. In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 40.
2. K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), pp. 3–4.
3. Joseph P. Clancy, introduction to *The Earliest Welsh Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1970).
4. Clancy's translation of the text of the *Goddodin*, in ibid.
5. The following citations appear in Terence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
6. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 136, 138, 202.
7. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925), p. 5.