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Grimms' Fairy Tales Midterm Essays

Vorrat and _Rat_ in the introductions of Keller and the Grimms.

In Keller's "Vorwort" and in the Grimms' "Vorrede" one can separate a description of the formation process of the material with which they are working from the role they see themselves playing in its presentation. Although both write of the rediscovery of an earlier folk tradition from fragmentary surviving evidence, the difference in the nature of the material—orally transmitted stories, for the Grimms, and Christian(ized) sagas—places them on different sides of the same historical process: the enclosure in and exclusion from the *Vorrat* of the objects of a pre-Christian oral culture.

Keller works from those stories that survived by transformation, almost disappearing into new cultural objects: the *Sagen* much operated on by "kirchliche Fabulierkunst," within which echoes a *künstliche Fabulieren* by which *Sagen* are written new to include Christian elements. The subsumption of those older stories into a Christian tradition is their condition of survival: with the proper changes made they are able to live on, to be collected and disseminated among Christians. The oral stories survive paradoxically by their christening as *Sagen*, in which form they can (paradoxically) be safely written down and multiply. Keller has masses of composed material to work from. His *Vorwort* begins, "[b]eim Lesen einer Anzahl Legenden." He reads to for fragments and traces. In the masses of material, he proposes (tentatively, by convoluted hypothetical formulations) that there might exist these "Spuren" of an earlier "Erzählungslust." Later, this trace-sensing echoes is his explicit method: "so verspürte der Verfasser die Lust zu eine Reproduktion jener abgebrochenen schwebenden Gebilde." The sensing of traces

(*Spurenverspüren*?) implies that some original character of the stories—a desire in both instances—causes them to stick out and be discoverable.

These fragments are mixed in with material that, evidently, does not contain the same desiring force. By Keller's implication, some of what has been lost from the original material was censored, and some of it, one imagined, dissolved into the new context, unable to differentiate itself. The former would have been the most profane and the latter the least. Between these two extremes (what required explicit censure and what was left to harmlessly fade over time) lie the fragments on which Keller fixes, possessing enough self-insisting desire to survive distinct but not so much as to merit an excision. His story acts out the insistent force these elements have: even as fragments, they were so alive to his senses that he felt the need to preserve them by forming new stories around them. These fragments drawn from "der ungeheure Vorrat des Stoffes" can be recovered from the Christian tradition only by their inclusion in it—further, they announce themselves especially by their out-of-placeness in that tradition. There is something subversive about their presence in the cultural *Vorrat* that will be easier to explain after tracing the metaphorical place of *Vorrat* in the Grimms' "Vorrede."

The Grimms do not write of masses of available material, so abundant that a fragmenting reading practice is called for: rather, their image is of a harvest destroyed by a natural disaster. The present, by analogy, is landscape barren by the standards of story-seekers, and only in certain accidental overhangs do a few stray crops still grow. There is something proto-Darwinian in the logic of survival: the niches have no special character. They are literally low ("niedrigen Hecken oder Sträuchern") and do their saving work unintentionally, with indifference. They are not providing shelter; the shelter seems to secure itself ("ein kleiner Platz sich gesichert hat"). Of the plants that grow there, then, their only special feature is that they were growing in an enclave

when the storm came. With this naturalistic metaphor, the Grimms mean to say that wherever stories are found in alive, they will be found in niches— not because stories are proper to niches and rather because niches happen to be out of the storm. For each story that has survived to be collected, there must be a niche that harbored it. Whether one takes these to be literal geographic enclaves (insular communities, small rural villages) or somehow unassailable regions of cultural imagination, the emphasis in the process shifts to the niches, the self-securing places safe from time's ravaging. The passage mourns more for the stories lost out in the open field ("was in früherer Zeit geblüht"), the wide majority cut down by exposure to whatever elements dissolve culture from one age to the next.

When Benjamin writes that the story told by the storyteller always refers back to natural history, perhaps it partly by its own production through the cycle of births and deaths, living where living is possible, dying where it's not, that this authority is forged (94). This would suggest that the story, itself a record of niche in which survival is possible, carries abstract information about survival simply by the fact of its survival. Benjamin's *Rat*, the offer of the consummate storyteller, is encoded in the stories relation to natural history: by virtue of its reaching the present day, it *knows* something about where continued existence is and isn't possible. The virtues of the sheltered gleaned grains for the Grimms—"winterlang sind sie Nahrung, vielleicht auch der einzige Samen für die Zukunft"—invoke the metaphorical answer to household needs and "proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" which live under Benjamin's *Rat*.

Quite separate, though, is the "Vorrat" of Keller and the "großen Vorratskammern" of the Grimms, to which the less sheltered plants would be condemned by the sweep of the sickle. Where most German words built around the word *Rat* retain or even stress further its abstract

sense, *Vorrat* has a direct connection to the physical storing of goods for later consumption, made yet more concrete with the addition of *-kammer*. In the Grimms' "Vorrede," it is a place to be avoided. Rather than a site of survival, it is a cell where things are kept to be consumed, and in their consumption, destroyed. What is in the *Vorratskammer* is safe from the storm, but it has not survived its storing on its own terms. This lines up with Keller's usage, in which the *Vorrat* is the collection of rewritten tales, collected and modified by church intervention. What Keller allows for (that the Grimms' explanation does not) is that even the jail-like enclosure of the *Vorrat* (to which the church keeps the keys) can be a niche in which certain fragments survive. It is as though there is something growing in the storehouses, and this profane spoiling, when discovered, is as much a story of improbable survival as the spikes in the bushes' shadow. Such a possibility for plants to live on past harvest and storing is present beneath the Grimms' contradictory metaphor of seeds that are both saved and eaten for sustenance. The non-consumption of narrative material by its use differentiates it from the stores of the crypt-like *Vorrat*, both in the Grimms' case (where it avoids harvesting) and in Keller's (where it is not consumed even after centuries in the storehouse). In their ability to continually address the present—to bring it counsel toward a continuation in Benjamin's sense—the objects of Keller's and the Grimms' interest do not age into the historical archive of *Vorrat*. Still speaking to the listener, they carry information in the very record of survival which, simply in having survived, they constitute.

Contradictions around *Not* in two stories.

If needing something is not having it, the truly needy have a certain safety. Since there is no taking what someone doesn't have, the apparently mundane state of hunger provides a spiritual protection for children like Hänsel and Grethel and the daughters in *Die Kinder in Hungersnot*. In both stories, the apparent victimhood of the starving children set up by the circumstances is contradicted by a strange power they draw from the condition of need. This empowerment figures in both as a further reversal in which the children provide for the parent who could not provide for them. In both stories, the mother figures un-mother themselves in an attempt to consume or reabsorb the defiant survival the children represent. Unable to take from those who have nothing, they rather dissolve themselves into a futureless state of absolute mortality.

The starved children do not expect or seem to especially desire food. Hänsel uses his only bread to lay the trail and Grethel shares her piece with him. Even when they are lost in the woods and have become "so hungrig," the discovery of the witch's house is not a feast scene (89). The feasting is rather on the part of the witch, for whom the cooking and eating of the children she captures "war ihr ein Festtag" (90). For the witch, eating and celebration collapse around that *Fest* in a negative model of lonely indulgence (in a time of famine). The children meanwhile "wollen [sich] satt essen," to eat to satisfy their hunger, something the witch's feast preparations have nothing to do with. The witch's desire has nothing to do with any human hunger and is rather a perversion of hunger-satisfaction in which the satisfaction of eating is pursued in the absence of need. It is almost as though the witch, needing nothing, had her need displaced. Because the children are hungry, their need remains simple and grounded—it is even the secret source of their elusiveness. Small and light, they sneak around at night undetected, survive on a

single piece of bread and berries for days, and ride on the back of a duckling. Crucially, Hänsel lightness (real, and then feigned by the finger trick) postpones his slaughtering some weeks. When they need solidity, they borrow it from stone and iron. Even eating, they are half-spiritualized: in response to the witch's question they say "der Wind, der Wind, das himmlische Kind" (90). Like the wind, they are heavenly children, no good for eating. In expelling them from their home, the parents actually lost the only members of the household who were ready to take the need they faced productively. Thus is it them who bring the household out of poverty.

The witch, too, is "leicht"—light enough for Grethel to get her into the oven on the board (91). She, too, does not seem to eat—besides children every now and then—despite all the food and other valuable items she keeps around. When Grethel prays "barmherziger Gott, hilf uns armen Kindern aus der Not," she voices the strange wish "hätten uns lieber die wilden Tiere im Walde gefressen, so wären wir zusammen gestorben" (91). It is more than that they should die together—rather, Grethel suffers because with wild animals, at least one could imagine it a death to indifferent natural cycles. But of course wild animals would not eat these children, for there is nothing to eat. They are heavenly children, made out of wind. The witch is the stories answer to the question: who would desire to eat a heavenly child? Despite the fattening procedure, the witch can only want something which has nothing to do with meat or hunger. She wants to eat the only thing these children have: their spirit, a lightness of child-being and innocence which, paradoxically, arises from need. She wants to consume what lets them live on starving, wants to consume their heavenly parts. This is what Grethel fears and prays to be saved from. Ironically, in needing their faculty to deal with need, the witch has already missed the point. Her lightness is a spiritual starvation.

The daughters in *Die Kinder in der Hungersnot* have a similar power in the face of need. Though the whole family is evidently starving, they neither complain nor seem in low spirits. It is rather the mother that "ganz außer sich und in Verzweiflung geriet" (858). The scene plays out a disturbed inversion of the selflessness expected of maternal care. This contradiction—by which the mother survives thanks to her childrens' sacrifice—results from a rejection, on the part of the mother, of her own motherhood, with the eventual result being the loss of that status. In the traditional mother figure, the children stand as a testament to and demand for *selflessness* on the part of the mother. One way or the other the mother expands her idea of self-interest to include her children, compromising a concern for the direct bodily self. In this story, this self-compromise has not come off correctly: a mother "ganz außer sich" has, paradoxically, begun a sort of accounting of what she should include within her self. What she is outside of is rather motherhood.

Inside of "Verzweiflung" there is already the suspicion (*Zweifel*) of the daughters, now understood as unwanted extra mouths, the unnecessary products of reproductive doubling. Even the fact of there being two daughters is an excess that the mother now questions, first threatening to kill just the older one. It is not just that she regrets producing them (as one would a bad investment), but that their presence during the famine produces a doubt experienced as despair. She finds in them something duplicitous—connected etymologically to *Zweifel*, originally from *zwei + falten*—because they do not participate in the famine's logic of need. Unlike the mother, they do not complain of hunger and when food is needed, they are the ones to go find some. Like Hänsel and Grethel, they barely seem to mind starving to death. Their innocent defiance despite grave needs undermines any logic by which the mother might excuse what she will do to them. They defend themselves by refusing to empower the false logic in which it would make sense for

them to die, with their obliging nature contradicting the rejection of obligation on the mother's part. It does not matter that they bring bread, for the mother can never be satisfied so long as the daughters are around: their devotion blocks her desire for a release from the family's obligations. Rather than seeing in her children the possibility of a kind of survival past death—which the children epitomize in their unworried reaction to the famine—she sees them as blockages responsible of her own mortality. It is as though she is trying to reclaim the survival they represent, to restore it to herself.

In her final command to them, "ihr müsset doch sterben, denn wir müssen sonst verschmachten," she justifies this reincorporation by a bodily danger which itself incorporates the daughters under a "wir" that they cannot be present for (858). In fact, the only person who is saved from starving by the daughters death is the mother, not the familial "wir." Outnumbered by the daughters, she slyly borrows them back into the "wir" of potential future sufferers should they not die. The result is that the daughters martyr themselves *for themselves*, a bizarre logical move representative of the illogic of the mother's persecution of her daughters. Even in their acquiescence they get the last word, announcing that "wir wollen uns niederlagen" until the "jüngste Tag" arrives (858). This final act affirms their power to endure by the same metaphor that lets "jüngste" indicate perfection, eternity, and life released from mundane need. The mother, meanwhile, is no longer a mother and comes so free as to get lost by the narrative itself: "weiß kein Mensch, wo sie geblieben ist" (858). Her disappearance is less a release than an annihilation. That no one knows where she has ended up suggests an absolute isolation after the family's destruction and the possibility that she has not yet found rest. The eternity she has won is not youthful survival so much as the weary, shuffling restlessness of the orphaned and homeless. Like the witch and mother of Hänsel and Grethel, the mother of *Die Kinder in*

Hungersnot tries to capture the youthful promise of survival from children, not realizing that it is precisely because the children have nothing that nothing can be taken from them. Rather than the transfer of defiant energies for survival, these mother-figures rather achieve an un-mothering that destroys their only chance for transcendent survival, dissolving them into wandering ash.