



Restraints and Possibilities

Article Author:

[Kevin Crossley-Holland](#) [1]

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Kevin Crossley-Holland considers the tradition of the folk-tale.

Kevin Crossley-Holland considers the tradition of the folk-tale from the viewpoint of a writer eager to make his stories 'keen, quick, shining, resonant and his own'.

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From time to time, I copy out a brief quotation or aphorism and post it on the wall. Festina lente! (Hurry slowly). In the beginning was the word. Possunt quia possunt videntur (They can because they believe they can). Greening is growing. Solvitur ambulando (Solve it by walking).

I don't know why so many of these sayings are in Latin. Perhaps the very nature of that language gives them a certain resonance and gravitas! Then, there's also another, larger sheet on the wall, headed 'Folk-tale':

- Who was/is the teller?
- Who were/are the audience?
- Who did/does the tale belong to?
- Whose were/are the words?
- What did/does the audience expect of the tale?
- What is the form of folk-tale?

This small article does not directly answer these simple, though far-reaching questions. But while formulating strategies for retelling tales, they have been my constant reminders that I'm working within a tradition, however much that tradition may have changed with the advent of literacy. They remind me that an understanding of how folk-tale works, no matter to what uses one wishes to put it, will always be the best bedrock for the stream of the imagination.

Let me begin with the most unobtrusive roles available to the writer working in the folk-tale tradition: editor and translator (in my case, from English into English). One sometimes comes across an earlier version of a story so plot-perfect and word-perfect that one's instinct is largely to leave well alone. I responded in this way to much of the poet Robert Southey's beautifully cadenced version of 'The Three Bears' (**The Doctor**, 1837), stepping in only to convert Southey's 'little old Woman' with an 'ugly, dirty head' into Goldilocks and to remove some of his moral asides. Nowadays, we expect our storytellers not to state but reveal truths!

Some of the most haunting of all English folk-tales ('The Dead Moon', 'The Mist', 'The Strangers', 'Share' and 'Yallery

Brown') were first written down in almost impenetrable Lincoln-shire dialect: AN `n ahl coom o' to'nin' fro' th' au'd wa'ays - that sort of thing! Although these tales, like the splendid gypsy Cinderella-story, 'Mossycoat', were collected from oral tradition, they seem surprisingly at home on the page. This is, I think, because they have all the immediacy, but little of the rough-edged or discursive quality of direct speech, and so with them I have seen the writer's task as one of direct translation from dialect into Standard English.

Now for something much more radical! It's perfectly possible to maintain the traditional swiftness of a tale, which moves from A to Z without digression or so much as a glance at its own navel, while at the same time stepping into it and telling it, as it were, from the inside out.

I've found this a particularly useful device in the case of `outsider' stories (and there are many in the canon of British folk-tales) where one wants to draw attention to a protagonist's isolation, and allow him to tug at the heartstrings by telling his/her own sad story. Thus a wildman - a relative of the Green woodwose and merman, unforgettably portrayed by Charles Keeping (**The Wildman**, Deutsch, 1976) - tells us the heartbreaking story of how he is `only free away from those who are like me, with those who are not like me'. And in `The Field of Fine Flax', a woman describes her young mother's ostracism from her Orkney village:

She was sixteen when I was born.

'Bonnie, 'she murmured, as I fed at her breast. `Bonnie. Brave.' She was brave and bonnie.

The Northern Lights shook their curtains on the night I was born. Clean and cold and burning.

And the father,' they said. `Who is the father? Where is the father?'

She said, 'I cannot tell. .. '

Wind sang in the shell; sun danced in the scarlet cup; dew softened the ear.

Days and questions, questions and days. Her mother, her father, her friends, the minister, the elders.

'I know nothing you do not know,' she said. `Why do you ask me if you don't believe me?'

`Out,' they said. Away. Out of our sight. You and your issue.'

We lived in a bothy by the ocean. One room with no window: it smelt of pine and tar and salt.

In recent months, I have been thinking further about the use of monologue and the possibilities of giving inanimate objects the power of speech. In retelling the story of how the church tower at Dunwich in Suffolk fell into the sea, and the church bell continues to ring under the water (a motif found in several places around the British coast), I've hit on a method of retelling I can best describe as radial. Each constituent of the story (the bell, the bellwoman, the sea-god, the sailor, the cliff, the dead, and so on) has its own brief monologue, or `spoke', and in aggregate these spokes add up to

the full wheel of the story:

I am the night storm. I AM THE STORM.

*Down with the bell and down with the
belfry. Down on the white head of the bellwoman. Down with the whole
church and the tilting graveyard. Down with the cliff itself cracking and opening and sliding and collapsing. Down with
them all into the foam-and-
snarl of the sea.*

*I'm the night-storm and there will be
no morning.*

I am the morning. I am good morning.

*My hands are white as white doves, and
healing. Let me lay them on this purple
fever. Let them settle on the boat. Nothing lasts for ever. Let me give you
back your eyes, fisherman.*

What this approach lacks is driving narrative. The effect is as if one were viewing not continuous film, but a slide-show. What is won is atmosphere and, maybe, a sense of the relationship of all created things.

For some reason, I have seldom retold a tale in verse (an exception is the ghost story of 'Old Echo' in my **British Folk Tales**), but of course metrical and rhyming verse is very much part of the folk-tale tradition, and there remains important work to be done in quarrying and translating verse-tales from such anthologies as Sir Walter Scott's **Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border** (1802-3), which includes the ballad of 'Tam Lin', and F J Child's wondrous **The English and Scottish Popular Ballads** (1882-98) and Sabine Baring-Gould's and H F Sheppard's **Songs and Ballads of the West** (1889-91).

A surprising number of contemporary poets have, however, taken a folk-tale or a motif as a point of departure. Walter de la Mare, Robert Graves, Anne Sexton, Randall Jarrell, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath and many another have turned their attention to Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Rapunzel ... one of my favourites is Stevie Smith's 'The Frog Prince':

*I have been a frog now
For a hundred years
And in all this time
I have not shed many tears,*

I am happy, I like the life...

*But always when I think these thoughts,
As I sit in my well
Another thought comes to me and says:
It is part of the spell
To be happy
To work up contentment
To make much of being a frog
To fear disenchantment...*

Most folk-tales are set in a timeless time, but some - usually known as 'historical tales' - take place at a specific moment and in a specific locality. I'm thinking of stories such as 'Dick Whittington' and 'The Pedlar of Swaffham' in which a piece of verifiable historical grit is clothed in fantastic pearl. We know, after all, that there was an historical character called Richard Whittington. He came from Gloucestershire, and was three times Lord Mayor of London, but how on earth did he get mixed up with a wealth-giving cat?

Stories like these seem to call out for full period costume, and that is what I have sometimes given them: an historical setting with much more attention to the details of day-to-day life than one finds in stories collected from the oral tradition. In retelling tales in this quite leisurely (up to 5000 or 6000 words) way, I am recognising that while I write my tales with keen awareness of how they will sound, and in the hope that they will be shared by parent or grandparent and child, they are firstly literary compositions.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, eighty per cent of the population of Britain lived in villages, hamlets and isolated farms. Now, eighty per cent live in cities and towns. Is there a danger that today's urban children may find the experience of folk-tale somewhat remote because their contexts are so regularly rural? And if so, what is the writer to do about it?

In telling the Beauty-and-the-Beast tale known as 'The Small-Tooth Dog', I decided to transplant the story into the backstreets of some city, and begin with an attempted mugging. The intended victim, Mr Markham, is saved by the intervention of a big brindled dog:

*'You've saved me a packet, 'said
Mr Markham, clasping a hand over the
inner pocket of his jacket. I've got the
week's takings in here. More than a thousands pounds.'
I know,' said the dog.*

Mr Markham offers the dog his 'most precious possession', but the dog declines various fabulous gifts in favour of Mr Markham's daughter!

*Me?' cried Corinna. 'Not likely'
'He's not an ordinary dog, 'said
Mr Markham.
'You're daft as a brush, 'said Corinna 'You'll see, 'said her father. He's waiting outside the door.'
'Crazy!' said Corinna.*

I greatly enjoyed updating this tale; I think there is a good argument for doing so; and I think it likely that I shall attempt to do the same with other folk-tales.

I wish I could write about many other opportunities offered by folk-tale: I'm fascinated by unconsidered trifles - little tales no more than a few sentences long - and like to work them up into short, short stories; I'm interested by the tale-within-a-tale (a device I used in 'Sea-Woman' in **British Folk Tales**) in which one can implicitly comment on the form one is using; I'm concerned by sexual stereotypes, and the legitimacy of changing a tale's characters or plot; and this year, I've turned the tale of 'The Green Children' into the libretto of an opera for children by Nicola LeFanu...

But let me end, rather, by suggesting a successful retelling depends not so much on the form - for it is apparent that retellings in many forms can be successful - as on the writer's depth of understanding and use of language. The writer working with folk-tale has access to an inherited word-bank, and needs to take account of the fact that he is working within a great tradition, but, for all that, his story must be told in language that is keen, quick, shining, resonant and his own. Et nova et vetera! Both new and old. The writer asks himself: what does this story mean? And how am I to recast it? And in the end, the quality of his perceptions and narratives is defined by the very words that express them.

Kevin Crossley-Holland is well-known as a poet and teller of tales. He's a frequent broadcaster and travels widely speaking in schools and to adults.

The illustrations for this piece are by Peter Melnyczuk from **British Folk Tales**, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Orchard, 185213 0210, £12.95. Some of the tales mentioned appear in **British and Irish Folk Tales**, Orchard, 185213 165 5, £2.99 pbk.

'Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible.'

Tolkien, **Tree and Leaf** (1964)

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