

Speaking the Truth with Folk and Fairy Tales: The Power of the Powerless

We have never known a time without lies, propaganda, and conflicts, but this hardly means that contesting the deception of those in power does not matter. Contesting misuses of history that inform the present, this essay presents three neglected writers and storytellers who offer alternative ways of thinking with fairy tales that give me the courage to try to live and work in truth: the Russian teacher and poet, Pyotr Pavolovich Yershov (1815–1869), the French politician and scholar of jurisprudence, Édouard Laboulaye (1811–1883), and the Austrian writer and essayist, Hermynia Zur Mühlen (1883–1951).

Keywords

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The very word “narrative” has been contaminated by overuse in the political world as a faddish alternative to “strategy” or “plan.” But this should not deter us from exploring its core meaning and its central relevance to the Post-Truth era. Narrative—defined as a spoken or written account of connected elements—is essential to the fightback called for in this book.

Today’s truth-teller must speak to head and heart alike. By this, I do not mean that press reports should be written in the idiom of fiction, or that financial analysts must now speak in iambic pentameters. This is not a call for emotional slush, touchy-feely outpourings or New Age news. Truth must always have a serrated edge. My point . . . is that veracity will be drowned out unless it is resonant.

—Matthew D’Ancona (2017:130–1)

Soon after the Emperor without clothes had realized he was nude and that a young innocent child had spoken the truth and exposed his stupidity, he ordered the boy to come to his palace. Everyone believed that the Emperor was going to reward the lad for being so honest and courageous. Instead, the plump, vindictive king ordered his guards to take the boy to the royal kitchen where the cook was to butcher the boy and put all his bones and flesh into a gigantic pie.

Once the chef had finished baking the pie, seven enormous wrestlers, all nude, were dispatched to carry the pie to a grand table in the palace courtyard. The king, too, was

JACK ZIPES is Professor Emeritus of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota

completely naked and stood on a pedestal in front of all his courtiers and thousands of local residents and peasants who had been compelled to attend this event.

“Undress yourselves!” the Emperor yelled. “It is time to feel the truth and be truthful!”

Anxiously, everyone in the courtyard undressed, for they were surrounded by menacing soldiers, all nude, but with machine guns.

“Now you are to taste the truth,” the Emperor demanded as he pointed to the pie. “I shall take the first bite, and you are all to follow me!”

One by one, hour after hour, the people took a bite of the pie.

“Not bad,” thought the people. They had all believed it would be disgusting, but, in truth, they did not feel bad eating pie like this.

“You have eaten truth,” proclaimed the Emperor, “and from now on, there will be no more lies in my empire.”

Yet, just as he finished speaking, dark clouds covered the sun and heaved a sigh. It was almost impossible to see the person standing next to you. Thunder and lightning plagued this royal event. When the sun recovered, its rays revealed a quivering hyena on the pedestal, and a young boy with flaming red hair.

It was difficult to see who the boy was, but he placed a collar and harness on the hyena and began leading it away toward a light in the misty green forest.

Stunned, the people began yelling, “Where are you going? Who are you?”

At first, the boy did not respond. Then all at once, he blurted, “I’m taking this hyena to face truth. I shall search for the essence of the bright light. Nobody on earth can ever escape it, no matter how powerful he is.”

Then, the boy turned, dragged the hyena, and walked toward the light. (Zipes, forthcoming¹)

IT MAY SEEM TO MANY PEOPLE that we are living without a bright light. We are living, as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes, without the fire that ignites truth (2017:4–5).² It also seems that we are living in some kind of exceptional time of conflict, or that times of conflict are exceptional. However, in my opinion, the history of the origins of the human species demonstrates that mendacity, wars, and conflicts have been omnipresent in all societies throughout the world and for all time. We have never known a time without lies, propaganda, and conflicts. The causes have been diverse, and include territorial, religious, and commercial disputes, as well as the ruthless pursuit of power by elite groups that leads to the domination and devastation of masses of people. Just as important as the major battles, to my mind, are the daily conflicts in common people’s lives that stem from the exploitation of children and women, slavery, racial discrimination, the commercialization of established religions, the privatization of education, and social class struggle. There is not one single nation-state in modern history that has brought about an iota of social justice without incessant personal and public conflict. Today the rise of the neofascist liar Donald Trump, and his numerous cohorts, appears to have caused incredible conflict, but I believe it will not help us to think of the present period as exceptional or even particular. The rise of Trumpism was predictable, and is connected to a larger picture. It is the result of the daily systematic degradation of democracy in America that cannot be thwarted by the so-called oppositional Democratic Party, which also bears responsibility for allowing the degradation to function. As the notable American historian Eric Foner has remarked, Trumpism

is the logical extension of a strand in American culture that has its own narrative plot and turns lies into truths (2017).

Does this mean that we should stop thinking with stories to confront the present conflicts and the lies and oppression of tyrants? Of course not. But it does mean that we must first begin thinking out of the box, from the margins, so to speak, not about reforming a corroded and corrupt political system, but about the potential for genuine defiance that might contribute to alternative ways of relating to one another with dignity and compassion that reflect a truthful and high regard for humanity. It simply means, in the particular case of folk and fairy tales, that we must read to find truths and act upon them even though we may be—and especially because we are—powerless.

Living in Truth and Why Retelling Stories Matters

In October of 1978, the courageous Czech nonconformist, playwright, philosopher, and politician Václav Havel wrote a long, profound essay titled “The Power of the Powerless,” in which he analyzed the conflictual conditions of post-totalitarian and post-democratic systems that do not serve the preservation of humanity. His purpose was to carefully examine the nature of power in diverse situations in Eastern Europe and to grasp whether and how powerless people might bring down despots and prevent the manipulation of the powerless majority. Although Havel wrote his essay to address particular problems in Czechoslovakia at that time, he also discussed how dictatorships functioned in the entire Soviet bloc and argued that they threatened to spread and endanger Western democracies (Havel 1990)—hence, the significance of his essay today.

Born in 1936 and raised in a country that knew major conflict throughout his life, Havel was a dissident who became the first democratically elected president of Czechoslovakia in 1989. He had felt the torment of oppression in prison, in his daily activities in the theater, and in several odd jobs imposed upon him. In short, his words emanated from his flesh-and-blood struggles to pursue truth.

It would take too long to summarize the major points of Havel’s dense essay—and we must bear in mind that it was written in 1978 to critique a new kind of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia and other Soviet Bloc countries—but I shall cite some of his remarks because they have a direct bearing on how contemporary Western political systems operate under a façade of democracy, especially in the dis-United States of America, and how truth-telling is vital for exposing strands of hypocrisy and abuse of power. For instance, his description of a post-totalitarian society bears a striking resemblance to the military-industrial complex in America and especially the corporations that form a network of control and manipulation. Let us think about this:

Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline. . . . This system serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people

will serve it. Anything beyond this, that is to say, anything which leads people to overstep their predetermined roles, is regarded by the system as an attack upon itself. And in this respect it is correct: every instance of such transgression is a genuine denial of the system. (Havel 1990:29–30)

In America and other Western democracies today, we live to serve systems, even if it may seem that we are free to make our own choices. We are not fully aware of how intricately the web of compliance is woven, and how its intricacy has increased in the past 50 years due to the massive development of sophisticated technologies that mask the contradictions of the sociopolitical system and the culture industry. Much of the operations of the autocratic system was described long ago by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), more recently by David Singh Grewal in his book *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (2008), and in a series of books about the liquid society by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000). It is not necessary to label the American political system totalitarian, post-totalitarian, or faux-democratic. But it is important to discover the cracks and leaks in the culture industry and the political-economic network in order to live a life in truth. And to know truth, it is crucial to see through and expose the society of the spectacle, what Havel calls “a world of appearances, a mere ritual, a formalized language of semantic contact with reality and transformed into a system of ritual signs that replace reality with pseudo-reality” (1990:33).

To a certain extent, we are all complicit with the present socioeconomic system in which we live, as long as we serve it without questioning it. If we accept and comply with the status quo without exposing the lies on which it is based, Havel maintains, we live life as a lie. Yet there is a prevailing hope in most people that there can be authentic change for better living circumstances. As Havel states:

The profound crisis of human identity brought on by living within a lie, a crisis which in turn makes such a life possible, certainly possesses a moral dimension as well; it appears among other things, as a *deep moral crisis in society*. A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a *demoralized* person. The system depends on this demoralization, deepens it, is in fact a projection of it into society.

Living within the truth, as humanity’s revolt against an enforced position, is, on the contrary, an attempt to regain control over one’s own sense of responsibility. In other words, it is clearly a moral act, not only because one must pay so dearly for it, but principally because it is not self-serving: the risk may bring rewards in the form of a general amelioration in the situation, or it may not. (1990:45)

Living in the truth, speaking the truth, and thinking with the truth can take various and diverse forms for everyone, depending on the context. There is no prescription or formula for discovering and feeling the truth. As Theodor Adorno made clear in a brilliant lecture on Hegel and dialectics in 1958, truth is actually dynamic: it changes conditions, and it is changed by conditions (Adorno [1958] 2017). We come to truth

through a dialectical process, and this is what Havel means when he asserts that we must live in the truth.

In explaining Hegel's statement in *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the "true is whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development" ([1807] 1977:11), Adorno remarks:

Truth is at once the process and the result of the process, that truth, whatever it is, emerges only at the end of this conceptual process, but that this emergence is not simply external to this process, that the process is "sublated" in this result, that the whole process itself belongs essentially to this truth, and is no mere propaedeutic that could then simply be detached from the result which you now have finally discovered and acquired. ([1958] 2017:22)

However, one factor remains stable in the dialectical process and reflects its moral dimension: truth relies on contesting the lies and the deception of people in power, whether one lives in a post-totalitarian or post-democratic society. In particular, living in the truth means understanding that there can be no such thing as neutral or benign tolerance in the present form that it takes in America and elsewhere.

For academics, in my opinion, it means taking history seriously, searching for gaps in the culture industry, and contesting the misuse of history to learn how reactionaries inform the present. That is, we must endeavor to make history usable so that we can become more aware of unfinished "business" of people from the past who sought to create greater social justice and equality by living in truth. What was spoken on behalf of common people and their conflicts and then buried must be unburied if we are going to move forward with hope. Words make a difference in our lives, and words that form stories make an even greater difference as we struggle to live lives in truth. This struggle is incessant, must be incessant, because we are constantly faced with master narratives that cloud our vision of what it means to live in truth. What then is our responsibility as researchers and teachers of folklore and fairy tales?

Let me turn once again to a thinker of the past to answer my question, to a neglected pursuer of truth, Karl Kroeber, who wrote a significant study in 1992 with the title *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times*. It seems to me that his words are still extremely relevant today. He writes:

All significant narratives are retold and are meant to be retold—even though every retelling is a making anew. Story can thus preserve ideas, beliefs, and convictions without permitting them to harden into abstract dogma. Narrative allows us to test our ethical principles in our imaginations where we can engage them in the uncertainties and confusion of contingent circumstance. It is not surprising, therefore, that narrative should be of special concern to us as we approach the end of the twentieth century, for the accelerated rationalizing and technologizing of our life has unmistakably increased the difficulty of storytelling—and also the difficulty of understanding what could have made story so important to so many other societies. (1992:9)

For Kroeber, storytelling is a social transaction between teller and listener, writer and reader, in which participants engage in a quest to understand and modify received

wisdom and provisional truths. Stories from the past are invaluable because they are at odds with the way we live, and they enable us to draw comparisons that have a bearing on whether and how we live our lives in truth. In fact, they can be enlightening and speak truths that spark the hope and latent potential in all of us to live lives in truth.

Here, I would like to consider how our fondness for folk and fairy tales, their popularity in all social classes, stems from the profound truths that can be glimpsed from the diverse human conflicts and insistence on social justice depicted in narrative. They attract us because they contain what we lack: characters who struggle and demand to live in truth, wounded characters who want to be whole and wholesome. In many ways, fairy tales, with their metaphorical allusions, are more truthful than so-called realistic stories because the tales are generally endowed with a sense of social justice that we do not find in our societies. While many folk and fairy tales admittedly reinforce patriarchal views about the world and the theme of “might makes right,” they tend to sympathize with victims and underdogs and are replete with compassion and justice, even if such “values” were not evident in the societies in which the tales were told and written. What makes folk and fairy tales so significant and resonant, if they have not been dumbed down for children, is, generally speaking, the fact that they combine voices of peasants and lower-class storytellers with the perspectives of educated upper-class storytellers and writers. The moral formation of the fairy-tale genre is predicated on the collusion and cooperation of people from different social classes and backgrounds and the need to retell and rewrite tales from the past that continue to be relevant to people’s lives in ways that test their principles and practices. The tellers and authors of fairy tales are seekers of truth, and the quality of their tales is connected to their truth value.

Three Storytellers Seeking the Truth with Their Fairy Tales

In my own work, almost from the very beginning of my research in the 1950s, I developed a strong disposition toward rediscovering and preserving the works of neglected writers and storytellers who sought to pierce the illusions created by the reigning forces of culture in their respective countries. To my mind, these writers and storytellers have offered alternative ways of thinking with fairy tales that have excited me and given me the courage to try to live and work in truth. Most recently, I have been working on three European authors whose tales I had somehow ignored—two whom I did not even include in my two editions of the *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*—and I have been endeavoring to compensate for my ignorance and shame by translating and republishing their tales, especially because they address present-day conflicts and demand that we rethink how to deal with the tyranny that has raised its ugly head in too many places in today’s world.

These writers are the Russian teacher and poet, Pyotr Pavolovich Yershov (1815–1869),³ the French politician and scholar of jurisprudence, Édouard Laboulaye (1811–1883), and the Austrian writer and essayist, Hermynia Zur Mühlen (1883–1951). All three were liberal, if not radical, thinkers and teachers who wrote fairy tales to express their political and moral sentiments and to reveal how tyrants and their cronies

manipulated people to work against themselves so that they would be deprived of the benefits of their creative talents and labor.

Born in the village of Bezrukovo in Siberia, Yershov spent his childhood years in the town of Beryozov and then moved to the major city of Tobolsk, when his father, a civil servant, was promoted to a higher official position that enabled him to send his son to study at a classical gymnasium (prep school) from 1827 to 1831. During this time, Yershov was influenced by the Decembrists, the Russian nobles who had attempted and failed to topple the Tsar Nicholas from his throne in 1825 to bring more democracy to Russia. Many of these nobles were banished to Siberia, where they contributed to a reinvigoration of local values and customs and to greater democratic education. Yershov, too, wanted more democracy in Siberia and helped establish a society for the ethnographic study of Siberia at that time, and, later, when his father was transferred to the capital at St. Petersburg, he began studying philosophy at the university. Familiar with Serbian and Russian folklore, Yershov began writing his famous fairy-tale poem, *The Little Humpbacked Horse*,⁴ in the early 1830s, and he showed his manuscript to the famous writer Alexander Pushkin, whose verse folktales had inspired Yershov. Pushkin was stunned by the high quality and originality of Yershov's verse, as were other writers and colleagues. When Yershov's poem, basically a protest against tsarism, was published in 1834, it was an instant success, and it appeared that, at age 19, he was about to begin a significant career as a writer of Russian poetry and tales. Indeed, many of his readers liked the narrative so much that they began retelling it orally, so Yershov's poem based on Russian folklore returned to the oral tradition of Russia in the nineteenth century.

Laboulaye, one of France's foremost jurists and politicians of the nineteenth century, published three unusual collections of fairy tales, *Contes bleus* (1863; Blue Tales), *Nouveaux contes bleus* (1868; New Blue Tales), and *Derniers contes bleus* (1884; Final Blue Tales), and other experimental works of fiction such as the science fiction novel *Paris en Amérique* (1863). Moreover, he was a great admirer of American democracy and supported the anti-slavery cause in America, wrote several books dealing with the history of America and American constitutional law, and played a key role in developing plans for the Statue of Liberty. Some considered him America's greatest friend in the nineteenth century. In France, Laboulaye became one of the foremost critics of the Second Empire, which he considered to be more or less a dictatorship. Consequently, he sought another model for democracy and turned to the United States to explore possibilities for adopting some American legal principles and precepts in France. During the late 1850s and 1860s, Laboulaye turned to fairy tales to voice his critique of the abuse of power by the French state and other monarchies and to embed his moral and ethical principles in narratives that were untypically typical. That is, he hoped to draw attention to well-known European and African fairy tales by questioning the more conservative messages they were conveying at the time and transforming them into unusual stories of social justice. This can be seen in his "Contes noirs et blancs" (1858; Black and White Tales), "Abdullah, ou le Trèfle à quatre feuilles" (1859; Abdulkah, or the Four-Leaf Clover), "Perlino" (1859–1860), "La bonne femme" (1861; The Good Woman), "Contes bohêmes" (1861–1862; Bohemian Tales), "Pif Paf, ou l'Art de gouverner les hommes" (1862–1863; Smack-Bam, or The

Art of Governing Men), all published in the *Journal des Débats*, the most important politics and law weekly in France. Almost all the fairy tales he wrote that appeared in his books *Contes bleus*, *Nouveaux contes bleus*, and *Derniers contes bleus* were first published in the *Journal des Débats*, indicating that they were primarily written for adults as critiques of typical fairy tales and the social and cultural conditions of his times. They were certainly not intended for children, although he later dedicated his three volumes of “blue fairy tales” to his children and grandchildren.

As the daughter of the wealthy Contessa Isabella Wydenbruck and Count Victor Crenneville, Hermynia Zur Mühlen traveled to many countries in Africa and Asia during her youth and was given a broad cosmopolitan education. In 1898, she attended a pedagogical convent in Gmüden, and when she graduated in 1901, she wanted to become an elementary school teacher. However, her parents objected because they thought such a position was beneath her dignity as a member of the aristocracy. Instead, Zur Mühlen was allowed to go to Geneva in 1903, where she learned the art of bookbinding and eventually came into contact with political emigrants who had left Russia during the upheavals of 1905. In 1907, to escape her family, she married a German baron from Estonia, Viktor Zur Mühlen, who had estates on the Baltic Sea. The marriage was doomed to fail because she could not stand the patriarchal rules of aristocratic married life and the closed societies in Estonia and Russia. When World War I erupted in 1914, she went to Switzerland because of her tuberculosis and divorced her husband. It was there that Zur Mühlen made the acquaintance of the Austro-Hungarian writer and Communist Stefan Klein, who became her lifelong companion.

After joining the Communist Party in 1919, she moved with Klein to Frankfurt am Main, where she translated such writers as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and Alexander Bogdanov and wrote popular mysteries under a pseudonym. Most importantly, Zur Mühlen herself became the leading writer of revolutionary fairy tales for children. Her major publications include *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* (1920; What Little Peter’s Friends Tell), *Märchen* (1922; Fairy Tales), *Ali, der Teppichweber* (1923; Ali, The Carpet Weaver), *Das Schloß der Wahrheit* (1924; The Castle of Truth), *Es war einmal . . . und es wird sein* (1930; Once Upon a Time . . . and It Will Be), and *Schmiede der Zukunft* (1933; Smiths of the Future). Her tales dealt with a variety of themes ranging from the exploitation of the working class to class war, and she experimented with the parable, allegory, and oriental folktale. Because of her political activities, she was forced to leave Germany in 1933 when the Nazis came to power, and she moved first to Vienna and then to Prague. A remarkably prolific writer, Zur Mühlen translated about 150 works and wrote 30 novels, mysteries, and story collections to earn her living, while keeping active in the anti-fascist movement. In 1938, she immigrated to England, where she spent the latter part of her life and published *Little Allies: Fairy and Folk Tales of Fourteen Nations* in 1944, along with stories and essays.

Yershov, Laboulaye, and Zur Mühlen were moral and idealistic writers who either created unique political fairy tales or purposely took tales from oral traditions and sharpened their political messages without being dogmatic. Their works, which spoke

truths to their readers, still have stunning relevance for contemporary readers and provide much truth for thought. As examples, I would like to briefly discuss Yershov's *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, Laboulaye's tales "Briam the Fool" and "Falsehood and Truth," and Zur Mühlen's "The Castle of Truth."

It is unclear exactly what Yershov's source was for his remarkable poem. However, it is clear that his fairy tale is related to the tale types ATU 530, "The Princess on the Glass Mountain" (Uther 2004:308–9) and ATU 550, "Bird, Horse, and Princess" (Uther 2004:318–20), and that numerous oral variants of the tale type circulated in the nineteenth century.

In contrast to the majority of folktales about the golden firebird, horse, and princess, which involve a tsar (or king) who sends his three sons on a mission that will determine who will become the future king, Yershov begins his tale this way:

Beyond the hills, beyond the seas,
 Beyond the forests dense with trees,
 Below the sky, above the ground,
 In a hamlet near a town,
 Lived three sons and their old dad.
 The oldest was a clever lad.
 The second, neither smart nor dumb.
 The third, a carefree simpleton.
 They earned their bread by growing wheat,
 Then hauled it to the county seat,
 Which was not very far from there.
 They sold it in the market square,
 A taste for bargaining indulging,
 And sauntered home with wallets bulging.

But life is hard, as well as brief.
 Into their hearts soon came a grief:
 At night the fields they'd hoped to reap
 Were trampled down while they did sleep.
 Oh, they had never known such pain.
 Whoever came would come again.
 Then all their work would be in vain:
 He'd trample and destroy their grain.
 The farmers vowed that they would fight;
 They'd post a guard throughout the night,
 And in the wheat field he would lurk.
 To catch that villain at his work.
 (2014:13–4)

What is striking about this beginning is the focus on poor peasants, their hard lives, and the implication that the youngest son, Ivan, is a fool. It is not a story about a tsar and his three sons. As is customary in many fairy tales—and we shall see this in Laboulaye's stories too—the fool will surprise us because of his integrity and kindness.

He exposes the real truth of each conflict through his simple honesty and courage. In Yershov's unique version of the tale type ATU 550, Ivan captures the so-called villain, a magical white mare, who rewards him with two black stallions and a little humpbacked horse with long ears, who will become his faithful friend. Ivan discovers a golden feather and takes the two stallions to the market square, where he sells them to the nasty and autocratic old tsar. Since nobody can control the stallions except Ivan, he is appointed the royal groom, causing the former groom, the jealous chamberlain, to seek his death. Indeed, the chamberlain convinces the tsar to send Ivan three times to fetch a firebird, the beautiful tsar-maiden, and the ring of the beautiful tsar-maiden. Each time, Ivan is threatened by the tsar, who tells him that he will put the young peasant to death if he fails to complete his mission. On each quest, the compassionate and clever little humpbacked horse comes to Ivan's aid. Finally, when the brutal tsar demands to wed the young tsar-maiden, she sets a condition: he must become young again by jumping into three different cauldrons filled with boiling water, milk, and cold water. In response, the tsar orders Ivan to jump into the cauldrons before him to make sure he won't die. Again, assisted by the little humpbacked horse, Ivan not only survives, but he is also transformed into a very handsome young man. The cowardly tsar now feels that it is safe for him to follow Ivan's example; however, he is scalded to death. Afterward:

Tsar-Maiden stood and hushed the crowd
 Which was becoming rather loud:
 "I grieve to say your tsar's deceased;
 He'd lived a long, rich life at least.
 Perhaps, I shouldn't intervene—
 But how about me for your queen?
 Decide and give me your reply."
 "Indeed we want you!" came the cry.
 "If that is what your wishes are,
 My husband here will be your tsar,"
 She said, and pointed to a man—
 Would you believe it was Ivan,
 Who had been standing very near?
 At this the crowd let out a cheer:
 "For you we would do anything.
 We'll even let a fool be king."
 (Yershov 2014:159)

As in many folk and fairy tales, truth is expressed by the fool's words and actions. The powerless Ivan may not be very smart, but he is honest and fearless in his pursuit of the truth. Rather than seeking power, he is mainly concerned with how to survive the tyranny of the tsar and lead a meaningful life. It is through his friendship with the kind little humpbacked horse that he not only succeeds in surviving, but he also reveals that living in truth can overcome tyranny. His rise from peasant to tsar implies that common people can realize the noble potential that they possess.

The same is true in Laboulaye's adaptation of an Icelandic folktale, "Briam the Fool," collected by Jón Árnason.⁵ It is the fool who embodies the truth in this tale of graphic brutality. It begins this way:

Once upon a time in the good country of Iceland there lived a king and queen who ruled a faithful and obedient people. The queen was good and gentle, and people rarely talked about her. On the other hand, the king was greedy and cruel. Consequently, all those who feared him felt they had to celebrate his virtue and kindness over and over again. Thanks to his avarice, the king had more castles, farms, herds, goods, and jewels than he could count, but the more he had, the more he wanted. Pity the man, rich or poor, who fell under his power!⁶ (Laboulaye 1868:9)

So great is the king's greed that he even covets an extraordinary cow that is the source of nutrition and joy for the peasant Briam's family, and they do not want to part with the cow when the king sends his captain of the guards to bring it to him. As soon as the peasant family resists, the captain and his guards murder the father and six sons. Only the mother and Briam, the eldest son, survive, and it is largely because Briam wisely acts like a fool that he is not killed. Soon thereafter, Briam is appointed the court fool to make the king and courtiers and foreign nobles laugh. Yet, in this role, Briam constantly makes fools of these aristocrats and embarrasses them. Finally, when Briam manages to serve a good deal of wine at a dinner table so that the king and his courtiers, including the captain of the guards, become inebriated, the king cries out to Briam:

"Jump on the table, fool, and amuse us with your songs!"

Briam sprung and landed lightly among the fruits and flowers. Then he began singing in a muffled voice:

"Each has its turn,
Wind and rain,
Night and day,
Death and life,
Each has its turn."

"What do you mean by this gloomy song?" exclaimed the king. "Fool, make me laugh, or I'll make you cry."

Briam looked at the king fiercely and sang in a menacing voice.⁷ (Laboulaye 1868:20–1)

It is Briam's voice that provokes the captain of the guards to mistakenly kill the king, and then Briam attacks the captain of the guards and splits his head in two with an axe. The gentle queen, who had always opposed her husband, wants to keep Briam at the court, but he declines and only desires to repossess the cow that had been stolen from his family. She grants this wish, and Briam returns to his mother with the cow. Nobody knows thereafter what happened to him, but everyone in the country can still point out the ruins of the hut where Briam and his brothers once lived.

Though this is an unusual folktale about vengeance, which Laboulaye politicized, it is also a tale about common people as fools who know the truth about living conditions under tyranny and who will rise in rage when least expected. This does not mean that the truth always triumphs in Laboulaye's retellings of old stories. In some of his other fairy tales, such as "The Eve of St. Mark" or "Falsehood and Truth," it is the denial of truth that concerns Laboulaye. For instance, "Falsehood and Truth" is a kind of parable; it is particularly disturbing and has a certain relevance with regard to truth in the conflicts of our times. It begins this way:

In olden times, Falsehood and Truth resolved to live together like a pair of friends. Truth was a good person, simple, timid, and confident. Falsehood was a smooth talker, elegant and daring. One commanded, and the other always obeyed. Everything went well in such a friendly partnership.⁸ (Laboulaye 1884:49–50)

A con-man, Falsehood convinces Truth, a woman, to plant a tree with him for the benefit of the people, and then he pretends that she would be better protected by burrowing into the ground to look after the roots of the tree while he takes on the dangerous task of protecting the branches from inclement weather, men, birds, and beasts. Consequently, he takes credit for the beautiful flowering of the tree. When the people gather around the tree to admire it, he preaches that he represents beauty and truth. He claims that society is filled with lies and that truth is falsehood. In fact, when a catastrophe occurs on earth, Falsehood blames Truth, and the people drive Truth further underground and build a tomb over her hole so she cannot return. Laboulaye then closes this tale:

To be more sure of his victory, Falsehood built himself a palace over the tomb of Truth. But it is said that sometimes she turns in her grave. When this happens, the palace crumbles like a house of cards and buries all the innocent and guilty people who have been living there.

But the people have other things to do than mourn their dead. They continue to carry out their legacy.

Those eternal dupes rebuild the palace each time more beautiful than the old ones, and Falsehood, lame and squinting, continues to reign there to this very day.⁹ (1884:56–7)

Truth is what we realize we lack as we read Laboulaye's folk and fairy tales. It is the realization that daily appearances deceive us, and unless we pierce the spectacle of life, our lives will be determined for us by systems that do not enable possibilities for autonomous thinking and social justice. Interestingly, Laboulaye is very critical of the masses of people, whom he calls dupes, for succumbing to the lies of Falsehood. Implicit here is that the populace will continue to blindly follow con men and their lies unless they open their eyes and begin to think critically. Nevertheless, Truth does not die, and one day people might find her and raise her from the ground.

Zur Mühlen, too, seeks to wake political consciousness and create enlightenment by smashing spectacles. Her focus was consistently on the plight of the working class under capitalist conditions that, she argued, could and had to be changed. Her most

significant collection of tales, in my opinion, is *The Castle of Truth*, and there is a strong autobiographical element in the title tale, which concerns a beautiful young woman from the working class who, after marrying a rich man, is exposed to the rays of truth from an indestructible castle. During a splendid party organized by her husband, she realizes how brutal the elite ruling class is when the castle's rays magically reveal that the refined wealthy people are actually predatory beasts. After she relates her experiences to these people, her revelations threaten to expose them. Consequently, her husband sends her to an insane asylum and tries to destroy the castle by having it torn down stone by stone. However, the stones are gathered by the workers, and they radiate in such a way as to create solidarity among the people. The castle magically reappears again and becomes a beacon of true light that exposes the criminality of the ruling class.

Typical of all the tales in this collection is an open ending. Zur Mühlen did not believe in the happy ending of classical fairy tales. The endings of her tales were intended to provoke and incite readers to political action. For instance, in “The Glasses,” readers are encouraged to rip off the glasses that deceive them as people in the East (i.e., Russia) did to attain fair living conditions during the 1917 Russian Revolution. Later, in the 1930s, when Zur Mühlen learned about Stalin’s oppressive reign in Russia, she resigned from the Communist Party while she continued to write anti-fascist works.

The Usable Past, or the Truth Value of Fairy Tales

In the case of each of these fairy tale writers, there is a strong connection between their writing anti-authoritarian fairy tales about truth and their own efforts to live lives in truth. They were powerless to bring about the social and political changes they desired, and yet they opposed the powerful through their writing and actions. They spoke truth to the unjust. Their works are part of what many historians call “the usable past.” As Eric Foner has explained: “History does inform the present, and it should. That’s what I mean by a usable past: a historical consciousness that can enable us to address the problems of society today in an intelligent manner” (2017:215). Indeed, this is why, I believe, we should try to make folk and fairy tales of the past usable history and to study them in light of their relevant sociopolitical context and truth value.

In her essay “What’s So New about Historicist Anxiety over a Usable Past?,” Rivka Maizlish (2013) cites Friedrich Nietzsche’s remarkable book *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1980) to clarify how a usable past informs the present and how looking to the past for truth can expose the false commemoration and mystification of historical events and figures. While not relating truth to political action as Václav Havel did in his essay about the power of the powerless, Nietzsche demonstrates why truth in research and truth in life are pivotal in determining the significance of usable history in our work on folk and fairy tales:

Only so far as the seeker after truth has the unconditional will to be just, is there something great in striving for truth which is everywhere glorified so thoughtlessly. . . . The world may appear full of those who “serve truth”; yet the virtue of justice is found so

rarely, more rarely yet is it recognized and almost always mortally hated; whereas the host of sham virtues has at all times paraded in honor and pomp. Few serve truth in truth because only a few have a pure will to be just, and of those again very few have the will to justice; and the most terrible sufferings have come upon man precisely from a drive to justice which lacks power of judgment. (1980:33)

If we think about folk and fairy tales of the past with justice and judgment in mind, there is a strong possibility that we might discover truths that have a bearing on our lives in the present and in the future. Critically thinking with and about fairy tales to make a difference today means to discern the ways both tales and storytelling are abused by the culture industry for profit and for socializing young and old to believe in the happy resolution of conflicts. Consequently, the spectacular use and glorification of commercialized fairy tales in the present are not to be celebrated, but contested. It also means we must endeavor to recall and think with folk and fairy tales of the past that bear traces of truth that can help us understand why we are still embroiled in conflicts we should have resolved ages ago.

Marcuse notes in his prophetic book *One-Dimensional Man* that the society of the commodity and the spectacle has managed to reconcile antagonistic contents so that “the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference” (1964:60). Then he declares:

Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation, literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction—the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repelled in reality. Their truth was in the illusion evoked, in the insistence on creating a world in which the terror of life was called up and suspended—mastered by recognition. (1964:60)

The distinction between true and false can clearly be perceived in the resonance of folk and fairy tales. Of course, truth does not exist in all folk and fairy tales. However, the reason why folk and fairy tales from ancient times to the present generally resonate with us is in their truth value. The appeal is emotional and rational. As Marcuse explains:

Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is. The modes in which man and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence. But these modes of negation pay tribute to the antagonistic society to which they are linked. Separated from the sphere of labor where society reproduces itself and its misery, the world of art which they create remains, with all its truth, a privilege and an illusion. (1964:63)

In researching folklore, folklorists become similar to the protagonists in folk and fairy tales who have adventures and search for what I call the truth of fire and light. The findings of fictional searchers and folklorists in tales bring truth to light. The

question, however, remains: Who is going to step away from privilege and illusion, as Havel did, to implement truth in action? Art can be the power of the powerless only if its fire is continually stoked.

Notes

1. “The Reward of the Emperor without Clothes” will appear in a forthcoming collection of stories by Jack Zipes.

2. The element in which the mystery [true essence of life] is dispersed and lost is history [*storia*]. We need to think again and again about the fact that the same term designates both the chronological progress of human events and what literature relates, both the historical gesture of the researcher and that of the narrator. We can access the mystery only through a story [*storia*], yet (or maybe we should say “in fact”) history [*storia*] is that in which the mystery has put out or hidden its fires. (Agamben [1958] 2017:4–5)

3. Yershov is often spelled Ershov in English.

4. There are two Russian folk tales with strong parallels to “The Little Humpbacked Horse.” See “The Firebird and Vasilisa and the Gray Wolf,” in Haney (2014, Vol. 1:453–9), and “Sivko-Burko,” in Haney (2014, Vol. 2:3–9).

5. Jón Árnason (1819–1888) was a librarian and museum director who published the first collection of Icelandic folk tales. In the preface to the second volume, the translators George E. J. Powell and Eiríkr Magnússon write:

In dealing with a folk-lore, such as that of Iceland, it is an extremely difficult task to do full justice to its rude but ingenuous simplicity, on the one side, and to the refined delicacy of the English reader, on the other. Many manners and customs which, in that northern land, excite no attention, and boldly meet the face of day, are by the English regarded as coarse, improper, and the like,—so sensitive is the English moral nature, and so prone to blush the English cheek. But manners, sayings, and customs sprang from the every-day events of a simple, pastoral life, where necessity, and the hard struggle with wild nature abroad and poverty within, rule and invent fashions, must, in truth, be more or less opposed to those which arise from an artificial refinement and the hot-house soil of luxury. The wild flower looks so strange beside the exotic. Considered in their true light, and regarded from their proper point of view, however, both meet with their true appreciation. (preface to Árnason 1866:vi)

What is most interesting about Laboulaye’s version of Árnason’s “The Story of Brjám” is that it is more jarring and blunt. Instead of a happy wedding, Laboulaye’s Briam disappears, never to be seen again.

6. Au bon pays d’Islande, il y avait une fois un roi et une reine qui gouvernaient un peuple fidèle obéissant. La reine était douce et bonne; on n’en parlait guère; mais le roi était avide et cruel: aussi tous ceux qui en avaient peur célébraient ils à l’envi ses vertus et sa bonté. Grâce à son avarice, le roi avait des châteaux, des fermes, des bestiaux, des meubles, des bijoux dont il ne savait pas le compte; mais plus il en avait, plus il en voulait avoir. Riche ou pauvre, Malheur à qui lui tombait sous le main. (Laboulaye 1868:9; all translations throughout the article are by the author)

7. “Fou, monte sur la table, amuse nous par tes chansons.”

Briam sauta lestement au milieu des fruits et des fleurs, puis d’une voix source il se mit à chanter:

“Tout vient à son tour,
Le vent et la pluie,
La nuit et le jour,
La mort et la vie,
Tout vient à son tour.

“Qu’est-ce que ce chant lugubre?” dit le roi. “Allons, fou, fais moi rire ou je te fais pleurer.”

Briam regarda le prince avec des yeux farouches, et d’une voix saccadée il reprit:

“Tout vient à son tour,
Bonne ou male chance,
Le destin est sourd.

Outrage et vengeance,
Tout vient à son tour.”

“Drole, dit le roi, “je crois que tu me menaces. Je vais te châtier comme il faut.”

Il se leva, et si brusquement qu’il enleva avec lui le chef des gardes. Surpris, ce dernier, pour se retenir, se pencha en avant et s’accrocha au bras et au cou du roi.

“Misérable,” cria le prince, “oses-tu porter la main sur ton maître?”

Et, saisissant son poignard, le roi allait en frapper l’officier, quand celui-ci, tout entier à sa défense, d’une main saisit le bras du roi, et de l’autre lui enfonça sa dague dans le cou. Le sang jaillit à gros bouillons; le prince tomba, entraînant dans ses dernières convulsions son neurtrier avec lui. (Laboulaye 1868:20–1)

8. Au temps jadis, le Mensonge et la Vérité respirent de vivre ensemble comme une paire d’amis. La Vérité était bonne personne, simple, timide, confidante; le Mensonge était élégant, hardi, beau parleur. L’un commandait, l’autre obéissait toujours, Tout allait donc pour le mieux dans cette amiable compagnie. (Laboulaye 1884:49–50)

9. Pour être plus sûr de sa victoire, le Mensonge bâtit son palais sur le sepulcre de la Vérité; mais on assure que quelquefois elle se retourne dans sa tombe; ce jour-là, le palais s’écroule comme un château de cartes et écrase les innocents et les coquins qui l’habitent. Mais on a autre chose à faire qu’à pleurer les morts; on en hérite.

Le peuple, dupe éternelle, reconstruit chaque fois un palais plus beau que l’ancien, et le Mensonge, louche et boiteux, règne toujours. (Laboulaye 1884:56–7)

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