The One Who Heard

by Sean Kane

Three apples fell from heaven: one for the teller, one for the listener, and one for the one who heard. So goes an Armenian saying – you will hear it quoted often in the great revival of storytelling that is happening today in many places. The teller? The listener? That's easy. They make up the storytelling act. But who is "the one who heard"? I imagine someone who transcends the storytelling act altogether, an insider to what story conveys in its arcs of almost uncatchable truth, someone half inside their oral culture and half out there with the Muse, daughter of the weathergod and the spirit of a mountain. One feels storytellers speaking in code here. Who are they speaking to precisely? What kind of singular individual is "the one who heard"?

First of all, that someone is a wholly mythic person. By mythic person, I mean an individual formed so entirely on the values conveyed by traditional stories that he or she will go out to live their truth. This is stretching the term "myth" a bit, because not all oral literature is myth. But storytellers are the first to assume that the values of the mythtellers pass into the other traditional story-forms, and are kept in suspended animation in them. Mythic knowing passes especially into the wondertale, so in talking about mythic values I mean also, with a spin on them, wondertale values. And I mean to a lesser degree hero-story values, even nursery-rhyme values. They are all mythic. I mean the whole unformulated philosophy of life that is implied in oral tradition. Let us call it mythic, and ask if there is any way we can still go out and live its truth.

What are mythic values? This is an important question in our age of ecology. Most broadly defined, they are the values that evolved from thousands of years of peoples living on the Earth on the Earth's own terms - not in terms of some trajectory of recorded human history. There is an Earth-relatedness in myth that is still echoing in the wondertale.

Myth typically involves two worlds, with a boundary between them. The one world is the world of human ingenuity. The other world is what we can call the Otherworld of spiritual ingenuity. The two ingenious worlds behave quite differently – they have different thinking styles -- but when they meet memorable things happen. Power is passed from one world to the other. The two worlds pursue their own concerns behind their domain-walls, but sometimes they play trick-or-treat with each other: they borrow or steal or exchange or leave gifts, always with the

Artwork by Derek Evernden

fortuitous outcome of ensuring the balanced survival of both worlds – the world of human culture and the world of Earth's nurture.

This double-universe, held together in narrative, means that myths project a basic plot involving passage from one world to the other. Then back again – because it is a prime directive of myth that beings cannot live long in a habitat that is not their own. So the plot may propel a human from this world to the Otherworld to bring back something valuable to humans. That something valuable may be the spirit of a person departed before her time, or it may be knowledge of where the bear is to be hunted, or knowledge of the weather and the right time for planting, or some other divine knowledge. In myth, such passages usually entail an animal guide, or the seeker assuming an animal form, first, in order to cross the boundary, then to negotiate with the animal-spirits. You will recognize this passage across a boundary as the archetypal plot of the shaman's dream-quest or, in agricultural myths, the underworld descent. That plot is still going strong in the wondertale and fairy tale. The goddess of the boundary is still there, though she may be reduced to a talking mouse; the Otherworld deities have been reduced to ogres or witches or trolls. Yet the hero, like a shaman, brings something back, even if it is a princess awakened from a spell. Jack brings back from the sky giants of the beanstalk a harp that sings with a human voice and a hen that lays golden eggs – the gifts of the gods: music and fertility.

Movement between the two worlds can be the other way as well. A spirit-being from the Otherworld comes to live in this human world for a spell, like the goddess Étaíne of ancient Irish literature. She leaves behind the gifts of fertility before she is recalled to her higher duties. Tonight you have heard the music of Faërie, she tells Eochy, King of Ireland, and echoes of it shall be in the harpstrings of Ireland forever. In this telling of the myth by the wondertale artist Alice Kane, Étaíne has "put into one year the joy of a lifetime" -- but she has to go back. In mythic narrative, you have to go back to your side of the boundary.[1]

If this movement through worlds makes up myth's structure, then myth's values are those that help one live completely in the everyday while negotiating with the mysterious Others. I won't sketch a whole ethics of mythic values. You know from traditional stories what they are - a heart for adventure; a sense of one's own singularity; generosity to creatures in need; an openness or exibility or dreaminess or courtesy of mind that you see in the wondertale simpleton; above all, courage and cunning. Mostly, it is not possessing what you have – your name, your identity, your destiny, your spiritual or material wealth. You do not hoard things. The injunction against hoarding is strong in hunter-gatherer myths, which say that hoarding ends spontaneous exchange with an Earth who can usually be trusted to provide. Even in the wondertale, the villains are the ones who hoard – the witch counting her victims' skulls or the troll counting his gold. There are other values too – but these are the well-springs of what I will call a mythic ethical sense. And my question is: can these values -- should these values -- be lived in today's society?

First, can they? And then, should they?

Can they? I say – yes they can! I know this having been raised on myth and wondertale. Now this upbringing may not seem like anything special worth sharing. Probably all of us who write or study literature were raised on the old storybooks. We know the old stories by heart. We are full of their values. But I was a sort of test-case of the captivated listener. That is because I was brought up by Alice Kane and her stories – not only her stories, but stories by my aunt's colleagues in the Boys and Girls' Division of the Toronto Public Library during its golden age (roughly 1920-1980).
Is the golden age of children's librarianship still within the reach of common memory? I hope it is. Alice Kane, honoured in her 91st year by York University at its Spring 1998 Convocation with a Doctorate of Letters, gives us cause to remember – to remember how the librarians worked their complex magic on children. How each librarian was an academic specialist in some branch of literature for children: Alice Kane specialized in the literary wondertale; Helen Armstrong, trained in epic and saga by W. P. Kerr at Edinburgh, handled those narrative forms. These specialists in story would present research papers to each other in the hours before the children came in. Each librarian had to learn to tell three new stories a week, from the best versions available. The librarians had to lay on their backs with the Toronto Telephone Directory on their abdomens, and try to raise it three inches. I'm sure none of today's revivalist storytellers do that! In short, they were, as someone has said, a guild of women artists masquerading as children's librarians.

They were my babysitters. Because my mother was often sick and died when I was young, I was babysat by the staff of the Toronto Public Library Boys and Girls' Division – but chiefly by Alice. I felt like the young King Arthur must have felt, educated by the faerie Otherworld.

Yes, I'm sure they practiced their pernicious theories of oral literacy on me, their captive subject. I believe I was provided with just the right story at just the right age. I'm certain that the storybooks came owing in artfully planned succession. The combined lore and witchcraft of the Toronto Public Library Boys and Girls' Division was tried and tested on my uncomprehending innocence.

For I was the ideal subject, you see. I was the ideal subject for an education in story. That is to say, I was imaginative and alienated. It is the perfect preparation to be the product of myth. I will say something about imagination and alienation later on. But first I must mythify my childhood some more.

I don't want to mythify it excessively – but you should see that not having a mother, and having a father who was powerful and remote, put me naturally in wondertale space. I was the perfect wondertale hero in the making. King Arthur was like me. Odysseus was like me. The children in Grimm and Asbjørnsen and Afanas'ev were like me. All my heroes were like me. I had no other ideal of proper behaviour except to be a hero and transgress the norms of the social. That is what I mean by imaginative and alienated. Never far away was Aunt Alice, or one of that sisterhood from the realm where things come true. In the serendipitous style of the fairy Otherworld, they kept – they still do keep – appearing and disappearing when needed.

So you see? I am a sort of ideal specimen.

What did that total education in story do for me? Well, I learned all about trolls. Do you know about trolls? Even today, you have to learn the rules for dealing with trolls. The fact about trolls is this: they can do only one thing – their own thing – well. They're good at the tasks they do, so you should never try to argue with them on their own ground. They are in charge of monotonous repetitive functions. For example, near the Faroe Islands, Christian Matras says, there is the weather troll who makes all the fog in the North Sea. In George Johnson's translation:

Now it is winter and almost night
and the troll sits and cards batt
in some stone that the winds hug
and sucks man-marrow and chews rag.

And the troll cards and the troll cards
and heaps up gray stuff yards and yards,
wind lays about and slings troll-gray,
and has a feel that is all coal-grey.[2]

Do you hear the monotony of it? They kill you with monotony before they eat you. Trolls are everywhere. You can't move on this planet without running into a troll. The government accountants who reject your income-tax return – they're trolls. The entire management of the modern university from the dean up – they're trolls too. The claims adjusters who terminate your home insurance unless you replace the more than one-quarter of your plumbing which is non-copper – more trolls. The student loans officers at the bank – they're all trolls. The administration of a nursing home for senior citizens – still more trolls! They're everywhere. Sucking the marrow out of your bones and spreading thick gray fog.

And, as I say, you don't argue with them on their own terms, or they just grow more heads. You don't ask them why they think they own that bridge. Instead you say to them something like this: "You want me to pay back my student loan? But look at the guy behind me – he owes more. Get him!" And then the person behind him says, "Me? What about the guy behind me? He owes tons more." You see? You tie them up in their own bureaucratic hunger. You can't cut off their heads because they'll just grow three more – that's what bureaucracies do – but you can get those three heads arguing with each other while you steal away. That's cunning – one of the qualities of the folktale hero. The cultural theorist Walter Benjamin calls it Untermut – under-spiritedness. It is one of the jujitsu-like powers anking tricksterism.[3]

Then there's the other flanking power – courage, Übermut. It leads to over-spirited situations. At the age of seven, I got lost in the mountains of British Columbia. My mother, never happy except in the Rockies, took me to a ghost town in the Kootenays. There, in a cottage halfway up the mountainside overlooking the abandoned silvermines, she collected flowers and wrote poetry in the margins of books. The first night there, we walked along a forest path to the ruined smelting mill, with the river hurtling straight down behind it. "Don't go off the path," she said.

Now, readers of the tale of adventure and transformation will at once recognize these words as a form of the negative injunction or prohibition. In myth, they warn of the boundary you cross at your peril. Prohibitions, of course, exist to be broken. That's what prohibitions are for. I have a homespun theory about this, based on my checkered career as a parent.

The theory is that at any stage of parenting, the parent will underestimate the child's actual age. Simultaneously, the child will overestimate the parent's actual age. The ongoing communication gap that results is called "growing up." "Don't do this," the parent says. And immediately the child goes and does the forbidden thing. He has to find out the meaning of life for himself. She has to earn her own freedom. Because freedom can't be given – the novelist Margaret Laurence used to say that, in relation to leaving a marriage: you can't ask for freedom; you have to take it. Then the child, trapped like Adam and Eve in an infantile paradise, reaches for the one thing that is forbidden. Growth. The freedom to find your own destiny. To freely choose good over evil.

That long night in the Kootenay mountains I learned fear. There is a Russian wondertale about "The Boy who Learned the Meaning of Fear." I learned the meaning of fear that night. I have never really been afraid of anything since – least of all trolls. And I have never felt lost since.

I learned something else too. This came around midnight or so, after I had skirted mine shafts and glacial rivers, learning the meaning of fear. Another outlook took hold. I made a lean-to for myself, right out of the children's book Wildwood Wisdom. I found a small pinetree root that made a perfect club. (The reporter for the New Denver Daily found this poignant: when asked what the club was for, the boy replied that it was in case he met a wolf). Then I slept. In the morning, I climbed the tallest tree and looked around the mountains. There was a logging road down there. Where there's a road, there's people. Remember, the books say, it's not you who are lost, it's your camp that's lost. So I spent the morning moving down through the forest, reaching that road. Pause and be still for five minutes; listen if any animal is around. By some instinct, I turned right instead of left, and walked into town from the direction of the Slocan valley.

I joined the back of the crowd of a search-party that was being instructed by a Mountie. Shot-guns and tracker-dogs.

I survived. You see – I simply became a wondertale hero. I had a trust, which the wondertale gives, that lost children will usually be found, that adventures turn out all right in the end.

I went back to that place of initiation last summer. Sandon is still there – a ghost-town in the mountains. In fact, it was a ghost city; during the silver boom, it had three hotels, several churches, two hundred prostitutes. It was the first city in British Columbia to have electricity. Now, the place is suspended in the timelessness of the mountains: the wooden store-fronts, rusted ore buckets, the sharp smell of minerals in the tailings.

I found the road where the Mountie carried me home to my mother on his shoulders – I remembered how disappointed I was that he was not wearing a scarlet tunic. I found the cottage on the mountainside where my distraught mother waited on the porch. The roof has caved in, and it is covered with moss, but the antiquated refrigerator is still there on the porch. I found the path to the mill. I found the precise place where I left the path to try to take a shortcut home to surprise my mother. And I retraced the first part of that journey I made years ago, when I was seven and crossed the boundary into the forest of the Mysterious Others. I knew every step of the way. I say "boundary" because I became a person of myth as well as wondertale. I crossed from the human world into the dark unknown of the animal powers. In effect, I behaved like an animal there – I trusted my wits and instincts. Perhaps I became a mythic person.

Yes – mythic values can be lived in our time – but you have to be thrown into a certain situation to live them. The larger question is should they? Should mythic values be deliberately lived in our time?

My opinion, for what it's worth, is that we live increasingly in a world very much like that of the folk wondertale. We have to use our wits to survive. We're up against powers that are bigger than ourselves. They are morally ambiguous; things that are bad for you these institutions present as good. Call them corporations and banks; Saint Paul called them "principalities and powers." They make themselves too shadowy to overthrow. Yet their actions are as capricious and arbitrary as any aristocrat riding his horse over your vegetable patch. Beside them, we are little people. Little people from broken families – there are so many broken families again nowadays. When a student asks me, what is a little person, I say: someone who owes the banks a student loan of twenty-four thousand dollars is a little person.

The peasant wondertale counsels a spirit of ironic resourcefulness. Tricksterism, as a way of survival, has no illusions about an apocalyptic overthrow of the powers that be. Instead, tricksterism works within the system, turning its vanities and superiorities to the trickster's advantage.

The myths and wondertales do something else too – and this is a secret that I'm not sure I ought to give away. But this is how the old stories work their magic on the uncomprehending innocent. They seek out the most imaginative and the most alienated among us, and they give that special individual a sense of her own uniqueness. This is the great untold right-under-your-nose secret of literature. I will tell you that secret now. Literature is a subversive elitist activity. Literature is elitist because essentially it involves insiders conspiring with insiders: literature is alienated people with imagination speaking in code for other alienated people with imagination.

Consider how deviously this system of recruitment works.

A young boy, for example, has lost his parents. So many of the oral myths begin this way – with the orphan as hero. He is isolated from the other children playing in the village. He hears a myth about a powerful shaman or a hero who also lost his parents when he was young. That listener will feel picked out especially by that story. He will feel it was meant just for him, and he will go on to live its mythic truth. Or a day-dreaming girl, held in subjection by her older worldly sisters, and seeing her mother's face in the ashes of the replace, hears a wondertale about another Cinderella just like herself. The listener will feel the story was meant privately for her ears. It is just for her alone. The ones without imagination, of course, hear nothing special in the entertainment. They are never allowed to know that a special magic went on just out of the range of ordinary hearing.

In literature, whether it is told or written, there are the tellers and there are the listeners. But, let me quote the Armenian saying again: Three apples fell from heaven: one for the teller, one for the listener, and one for the one who heard. There is also and always the one who heard. That singular imaginative and alienated soul is the real one the stories are after. That person will go out and live the truth of story as a hero. If the person lives long enough, he or she will become a storyteller. Thus an elite minority is recruited from generation to generation among the small minority of the human population that is fully imaginative. I mean the small minority in any sub-population – professors or garbage collectors.

This Reception Theory of literature I will call the Anne Shirley theory, because in her empowered singularity Anne "with an e" is one of literature's most typical products. Anne of Green Gables believed that all of literature was meant just for her ears alone. So, of course, does every other avid and alienated imaginer.

Notes

1. "The Golden Fly" in Alice Kane, *The Dreamer Awakes* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995), 83-92 at 92. This is a retelling of a story of the same name by Ella Young in Celtic Wonder Tales (1910, reissued Edinburg Bh: Floris Books, 1985, 127-141). For the original form of the story, see Sean Kane, Wisdom of the Mythtellers (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994), 90-101, where the myth is used to illustrate the concept of boundary.
2. "Weather Troll" by Christian Matras, in *Rocky Shores: An Anthology of Faroese Poetry*, compiled and translated by George Johnson (Paisley, Scotland: Wil on Books, 1981), 8.
3. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 83-109 at 102.