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Beautiful lies my father told me

Two kinds of true?

'There are two kinds of tales, one true and one false,' Socrates proposes to Adeimantus in the course of exploring the proper place of literature in *The Republic* (1935: 376). In this short paper, I will explore Socrates' proposition in the context of family storytelling, in particular in the case of my recently completed family memoir, *Learning How to Breathe*, which contains many instances of family storytelling. Some of these tales turned out to be true; some of them turned out to be false. And some of them turned out to be falsehoods that revealed a hidden truth. In order to investigate the sometimes blurred lines between what is true and what is false, I will examine one family story in particular; this family story was told - or, in this case, performed - by my father. To shed light on aspects of lies and truth that are revealed through a close reading of this story, as well as other issues of family storytelling that needed to be addressed while writing a family memoir, I will draw on the work of John Forrester, in particular *Truth Games*, as well as the work of Langellier and Peterson and Elizabeth Stone regarding family storytelling.

Oral narrative

For many folklorists, the truth-factor of an oral narrative plays an important part in how any particular story is classified. The basic criteria seem to rely on 'the extent to which a narrative is based on objectively determinable facts' (Littleton 1965: 21). Some folklorists, however, rely on the distinctions made by the particular societies or community groups in which the tales are told between 'narratives regarded as fiction' and 'narratives … regarded as true by the narrator and his audience' (Bascam 1965: 4). More recent studies of oral narrative have begun to disregard the importance of any determinable truth factor in the distinction between jokes, anecdotes, local legends, tall tales and personal narratives (Halpert 1971: 51). Some theorists, such as Degh and Vazsonyi, have gone so far as to maintain that 'objective truth and the presence, quality, and quantity of subjective belief are irrelevant' (1976: 119), and that what is important is that the narrative 'takes a stand and calls for the expression of opinion of truth and belief' (1976: 119). Limon observes that, in some instances, belief might be quite secondary to performance itself and therefore, along with Degh and Vazsonyi, he also calls for a "scholarly determination as to 'how these legends relate to true belief and how social function reinforces them'" (Limon 1983: 191). This last point relates especially to the particular storytelling habits of a family as it narrates its own history. If oral narrative takes place in a social context, perhaps, as Richard Bauman suggests, the dynamics of variability and negotiation are relevant to

questions of the acceptable levels of truth and invention in any particular tale (1986: 11). In other words, what is considered truth and what is not, in the context of a story, 'will vary and be subject to negotiation within communities and storytelling situations' (Bauman 1986: 11). Is it possible that this matter of context is related to the 'stray field of languages' which Roland Barthes proposes as a definition of 'culture' (1971: 1302)? Is it also related to the observation of Stuart Hall who thinks it is the way a story is told that matters more than what it says, what biases it reveals, or whatever truth it might purport to express (Hall 1974: 7)?

The initial culture in which I was reared, and which formed the fertile bed in which my love of telling stories was conceived, was an Irish/Celtic Catholic family of story tellers, lounge-room singers and musicians, whistlers, and anecdotal raconteurs. It was perhaps itself the 'stray field' to which Barthes refers, full of diverse accounts, narratives that obscured or disregarded the facts, and differing versions of reality. Stories were told not to just identify the self, but to amuse, to entertain, and only sometimes to instruct. In a way, stories were a form of anti-truth; or, if not anti-truth, then a version of the truth which was perhaps richer, more fantastic, and sometimes more profound than the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The cultural context of storytelling in which I was reared and which possibly formed my storytelling facilities when I started to explore them was quite clear. Negotiations were implicit. We were told stories so that we would be amused, entertained, delighted, scared; and those who told stories did so for the same reasons. The truth of the stories was never an issue. Sometimes they were true; sometimes they were not. It was part of the game of storytelling to blur those delineations. So, like well-trained psychoanalysts, we 'grew up with an equanimity concerning distinctions between truth and lying' and therefore operated perhaps with a 'very different notion of the rules concerning truth and lies than those implied by the blacks and whites of moral condemnation' (Forrester 1997: 4-5). Perhaps, in our case as well, as Forrester observes, we also recognized that 'the lies of [our] childhood [i.e. those told not by us but by our father] were … of great significance' (1997: 5).

Subsequently, as a child I never thought invention was lying. I had been brought up in an environment where stories began with an element of truth after which a narrative was extemporized and embellished, partly to entertain the audience and partly to entertain the narrator. This was not only my experience. I can provide here a piece of storytelling from the family: an interview with one of my sisters in which she relates the storytelling habits of my father. This excerpt appears in *Learning How to Breathe*, which contains many such instances of family storytelling about the subject of family storytelling:

> *Cathie*: I can remember sitting at the kitchen table one afternoon and Dad was talking about someone we knew when we were kids. I can remember listening to him for fifteen or twenty minutes. It was quite long in-depth story about things and I was just fascinated. And I really believed that it had happened and after about 20 minutes I looked him in the eye and said: *You're having me on, aren't you?* The whole thing had been a complete and utter fantasy. But he'd interwoven enough facts into the story to make you believe it was true. The story doesn't seem impossible because there's enough information there to make you believe it all happened. (Neil 2009: 94)

I never thought, in relation to his stories, that my father was a liar; we knew the cultural codes in which they were being told. Dad's father was a coal miner from Manchester; he had been born and reared in a harsh world. We understood that such impecunious beginnings might breed a whole generation of storytellers and raconteurs for whom pleasure, as a kind of delayed reward for their earlier lack of it, is a primary motive. These storytellers like to connect with their listeners, through words and also through actual physical closeness. They lean in, desiring a kind of bodily contact that their inhibitions prevent them from seeking directly. Their stories create a world that envelops; perhaps narrative might, in an aural sense, be a substitute for an embrace. As Muecke observes in *Reading the Country*, 'the materiality of the voice cannot be denied; its substance is a vibration which penetrates the bodies of those listening or present' (Benterrak et al 1996: 25). So stories, true or not, were told for the sake of their telling, and for the relationship that they set up between the teller and those to whom they were told. The stories spoke not just their text, but their sub-texts as well; they were full of engagement, humour, fancy, whimsy, as well as a sense of their own power.

The traymobile story

In *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, Donald Spence argues for the existence of two types of truth: narrative truth and historical truth, the first being the truth of creative art and the second the truth of actuality. But while 'psychoanalysis is supposed to deal in historical truth, in accordance with Freud's metaphor of the analyst as archaeologist unearthing the traumatic events of the past, Spence says it actually deals largely … in narrative truth' (cited Malcolm 1996: 34). I will purloin this observation and apply it to my experience as a child listening to my father's stories. I never mistook them for historical truth. I knew they were narrative truth; they were creative acts, and contained a similar magic to that of stories I read in books. The lies they contained were legitimate, in my view, because there was no question that they were presented as anything else. They were perhaps also inventions of necessity, to make more colourful and bearable an otherwise bleak, impossible world. And we loved hearing them for the same reason. They were projections of possibilities, a kind of lying that 'awakens us to the unknown … in the dialectic between the real and the possible, lying plays an indisputable role' (Forrester 1997: 23).

There was a particular story that my father told us when we were very young. I cannot transcribe it exactly as my aural memory does not extend that far back. So this will be a story (the one I tell) about another story (the one he told). In my catalogue of stories my father told me this one is filed under the name 'The Traymobile Story', a tale Dad used to tell after dinner. There were sometimes eight of us sharing a meal around the table in the evenings: five children, Mum, Dad, and our Grandmother. Though we never went without food, we lived and ate frugally. Sometimes between the eight of us we shared one chicken, along with a ration of one boiled potato and a slice of pumpkin each. We knew we lucky to have any food for dinner; Mum regularly reminded us that there were children in the world who had nothing to eat at all. After dinner we were sometimes even allowed a small serving of ice cream each. Often, while this treat was being consumed, Dad would tell us 'The Traymobile Story'.

The Traymobile was an object that Dad's family had back in England before they migrated to Australia. It was a three-tiered trolley made out of glass and metal. On each side there were a series of small drawers stacked one on top of

the other. On each drawer there was a silver knob and under the top rim of the Traymobile, there was a series of buttons and levers. The description of the Traymobile was always very elaborate. The Traymobile stood on the side of the dining room in Dad's home in Manchester, always in the same place, so everyone knew where it was at all times. Whenever anyone in the family wanted something to eat or drink, all they had to do was press a particular button and one of the drawers would slide open and inside would be whatever it was the family desired: thick delicious pastries, plates full of roast beef and vegetables, milkshakes of every description, ice cream so smooth and creamy it looked like snow, topped with syrups and creams and more flavourings than you could ever dream of. Miraculously, the Traymobile also had the capacity to deliver hot pies, sausage rolls, in fact most types of food, and in such quantities that it might well have been impossible to consume all of what was delivered.

This story was a leitmotif throughout my childhood. It was the subject of much call and response. *Dad, tell us about the Traymobile. Please!*, I remember calling out one evening after consuming only one small boiled egg for our evening meal and still feeling hungry. Ok. Ok, he responded. *Gather round kids!!* 'The Traymobile Story' worked so well, sometimes I swear I could smell the roast beef and mounds of chicken that were delivered, steaming hot, from its drawers.

Some who might have heard 'The Traymobile Story' and witnessed five salivating children longing for such a magical thing to appear in their midst might have been concerned that the story, rather than delighting or distracting us, might actually have been a form of torture. Because no traymobile ever did appear in our dining room, even when it was needed the most: when our stomachs still felt empty. They might interpret Dad's cunning and consummate acting skills as symptoms of a rogue father, taunting his impoverished kids with descriptions of things that were unreachable. But I prefer to see it as an imperative of imagination that he was passing onto us, 'a perfection of [lying] language for pragmatic ends' (Forrester 1997: 19). This was creative lying, a perfect lie perhaps, that, rather than dupe or mislead us, instead 'opened windows for us', as Forrester cites Proust, 'on to what is new and unknown, that awaken[ed] in us sleeping senses for the contemplation of universes that otherwise we should never have known' (1981: 213). In this case, the universe is a gastronomic one, the possibilities culinary, and the sleeping senses are to do with taste, smell, and vision. Without this lie, we might never have been liberated from the 'structural rigor' of our reality and instead, like the autistic child who can neither dissemble nor deceive, we would have lost all notion of the possible (Forrester 1997: 23). We might never have believed that one day we might have more to eat than we did as children; nor might we ever have believed that things might improve in our lives. Such limited thinking as a result of a strict adherence to the value of 'scientific truth' i.e. that there never was and never will be a traymobile and all that it symbolizes - abundance, expansion, choice - might have rendered us truly pitiful in a world that, without the traymobile, might have seemed too hopeless and empty.

Family storytelling as a strategy of social control?

In 'Family Storytelling as a Strategy of Social Control', Langellier and Peterson offer another position on the issue of family storytelling in their comment on the work of Elizabeth Stone in contextualizing family stories: 'Whether dimly remembered and mute, told aloud with pleasure and show,

confided discreetly or kept secret, Elizabeth Stone asserts that all people carry family stories "under their skin" borne variously as weightless treasures or painful tattoos' (1993: 49). They see these narratives, which provide, in Stone's words, 'what blood cannot' (1988: 70), not just as simple representations of family history or even merely as aesthetic performance or socio-emotional release by family members. Rather, they assert, family storytelling names practices of social control (1993: 50). Are these views of Langellier and Peterson valid in the context of 'The Traymobile Story'? Or in a family memoir such as *Learning How to Breathe*, a text full of family storytelling rendered for many of the above reasons: as representations of family history, and especially as performance and release by the family and its particular members? Are these stories made, performed, recalled, and even transcribed as a form of social control? And if so, what exactly is this control - and over what - that the stories attempt to exercise? Do they seek control over the teller of the stories, those who hear them, or those that then pass them on? Do the stories merely represent a pre-existing genealogy or an expressive family tradition? Or do they, as Langellier and Peterson contend, legitimate dominant forms of reality and lead to discursive closure that restricts the interpretations and meanings of family stories (1993: 57)?

In regards to the above and to 'The Traymobile Story' cited earlier, it appears very specifically that this particular family (father) story provides for its audience through its narrative what blood - or the flesh/ father - cannot. 'The Traymobile Story' reveals at the same time the vulnerability of the father with its implicit admission that such abundance is absent from the family situation. It also, though, perhaps reveals the father's need to control his potentially hungry children by creating an alternative world through the narrative; in this way, perhaps he offers something else - equally as nourishing perhaps, in his view - in the place of food. The narrative of this family story therefore provides, as Stone asserts, what the narrator's flesh and blood cannot - material and gastronomic variety and abundance. But what dominant forms of reality might my father be making legitimate through his storytelling? And do these alternate forms of narrative reality that dominate the physical and material reality lead to the closing off of other possible discourses, as suggested by Langellier and Peterson, that could arise from confronting the 'truth' of the situation? Can we imagine for a moment an alternative version of this storytelling performance explicated earlier: of a father gathering his kids around him and telling them that they were poor, that sometimes they would be hungry, and that the father could not adequately provide for his family? While this alternative family story might perhaps better position the children to whom the story is told in their relationship to the world outside the family, it is also notable, through its adherence to 'truth' by what is absent from it: wit, humour, imagination, and surprise. Also absent perhaps is the father's vulnerability regarding his view of himself as a material provider for his children and his subsequent need to 'father' his children by providing for them through the materiality of words delivered orally.

What would then be gained by the father, in this instance, telling the actual truth? And what other discourses might be opened up, therefore, by the absence of his preferred discourse? We would have learned very early that we were poor, not just materially, but imaginatively as well. Through this double lack, we might then have lacked hope, as well as adequate food. Would this have been more desirable? Would a documentary type approach to our situation have nurtured us?

Games of truth or lies?

To consider these questions above, I will refer to *Truth Games*, in which John Forrester makes this observation about the usefulness, perhaps even the necessity, of lying:

> The depth of consciousness created by the exercise of the arts of deception is the first arena for the practice of that dissimulation proper to the life of human intelligence. The same spirit permeates other expositions, for instance that of Karl Popper, who equates the capacity to lie with the capacity to imagine: the power to imagine other things, to negate, and thereby to create fiction, even hypothesis - and thence to create science. (1997: 9)

'The Traymobile Story' illustrates not just this imaginative power perhaps, but also the cunning and language skills that Nietzsche observes the Greeks may have admired in Odysseus: 'his capacity for lying, and for cunning, his ability to be, when need be, *whatever he chose*' (Nietzsche 1974: 156).

In 'The Traymobile Story', Dad perhaps exhibited more than just the inventiveness of creative lying; he also showed a kind of fatherly cunning in distracting us from our empty stomachs and gastronomically gloomy world. This perhaps, then, is a kind of lying that is 'distinguished from error or falsity by its deliberateness' (Forrester 1997: 24). In this story Dad played a myriad of roles, demonstrating the ability, like Odysseus, to be whatever he chose (Nietzsche 156). He was a poet; he was an inventor-of a magical object with tangible dimensions and painstakingly elaborated design; he was also Prometheus stealing the fire from the gods to bestow upon we humans, because by his fabrication he was passing on the warmth and fire of creativity, showing us by example that bypassing the requirements of both moral, scientific, and factual truth was sometimes necessary to not just survive, but to live. The Traymobile existed in the realm of 'psychic reality', where the tension between truth and lies is dissipated and dreams and envisioning are allowed to create a better, more desirable version of truth.

Transcribed spoken word or 'Lying through one's teeth?'

Is it possible that oral narratives, tall tales, family stories, also work this way? The hierarchies of narrative once classified the spoken word, the performance poem, the oral history, as inferior to 'literature', and, as Muecke observes, the 'tracings on paper' i.e. the words, and 'the voice have a different origin, a different form, and different purposes' (Benterrak et al 1996: 25). The two forms, however, are connected through the conduit of transcription. In the case of transcribing family stories delivered orally, these stories need to be spoken before they can be written down. After they are written down they can be traced back, and therefore understood in a kind of reverse motion. Creative lying that makes it onto the page, therefore, must first have been uttered orally (Forrester 1997: 24).

Dad's stories, which began in oral form and were only written down much later, formed the foundation of my subsequent storytelling. Although, as Elizabeth Stone observes, 'attention to [a story's] truth is never the family's most compelling consideration … encouraging belief is' (1988: 7), the transplanting of this type of discourse into the world outside the family can sometimes lead to problems, especially the problem of clearly delineating to others the demarcation lines between truth and fiction. Perhaps the storytelling habits learned from being entertained for years by my father's

'lies' could lead to the kind of ethical mistakes that occur when one culture intersects with another. In this particular case, the family culture in which I developed encouraged storytelling for many other purposes than just to relate what might be classified as the 'truth'. The storytelling culture which conditioned me and which I internalized as a sometimes deceptive blending (and blurring) of the real and the imaginary, therefore led to a kind of cultural displacement as I began to interact more and more with the culture of an outside world that had developed along more rational and moral grounds, less concerned with the necessities of survival and more with the Christian idea of 'truth'.

My father may have invented the traymobile to initially compensate for his own childhood impoverishments. But by passing it on in story form he was giving us more than an image of plenty to aim for. He was also bestowing a creative tool to use whenever we needed to compensate for our own inadequacies and the shortcomings of a difficult reality. To children well-grounded in social rules and moral niceties, this tool might have turned out to be benign, an instrument of harmless play. In my fanciful, willful, and often self-critical hands it doubled as a mask, a device of protection which I would call upon whenever I felt threatened or inadequate in a sometimes frightening outside world. When I began to write, I favoured what might be termed 'magic realism': I contextualized my first stories in the literary forms of fables, fairy tales, myths, elaborate, exotic, and sometimes fantastic parables. These genres were far removed from that of a non-fiction family memoir, in which multiple voices, of both oral and written origin, engaged in monologue, dialogue, and group discussion, needed to be acknowledged, edited, and, to a certain extent, orchestrated in a narrative that, according to Bhaktin, might then be termed 'dialogic'.

Subsequently, when beginning a text that contains so many instances of family discourse, where family stories are told and retold for a variety of reasons, I encountered problems that made it necessary for me to consider some of the questions raised in this paper. During the numerous drafts of a book in which family stories sometimes contradict each other and contain lies which reveal other truths, I have had to closely examine the habits of these family discourses, mine included, in order to position and understand the narratives in relation to one another, in the context of the book's structure, as well as the levels of its subtexts and multi-vocal storytelling textures.

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