

THE NEUTRALIZATION OF TROPES IN ARMENIAN FAIRY TALE NARRATIVES

Alvard Jivanyan

Abstract: An important stylistic feature of the fairy tale is its tendency to neutralize tropes by animating them. Distinctive fairy tale devices, transformations, for instance, appear at the expense of the intentional enlivening of the worn semantics of some hackneyed tropes. Neutralized tropes should be interpreted literally. In case of alternative, i.e. metaphoric interpretation, the succeeding narrative stretch will be under threat of logical and semantic collapse. A very similar phenomenon was observed by Zvetan Todorov in the fantastic fiction. As a rule, the oral fairy tale does not show the rhetorical figure and its extension in the same textual cut. The hackneyed trope is mostly absent. It is true; it can be easily restored owing to the fact that it is a phrase the listeners/readers are well aware of. Doubtless, we are far from claiming that any transformation in a fairy tale appears as a consequence of a rhetorical operation.

Key words: animation of rhetorical figures, Armenian fairy tales, fairy tale narrative, literal interpretation, metaphoric interpretation, transformation as a fairy tale device, tropes

Yuri Lotman has once commented on the propensity of the Romantics to get rid of tropes. It is possible that this tendency could be accounted for by their deep love of the fairy tale for an important stylistic feature of the fairy tale is its tendency to neutralize tropes at the expense of the intentional enlivening of their worn, hackneyed semantics. A very similar process was observed by Tzvetan Todorov in his major study of the fantastic where he examines the different ways that connect the figures to the fantastic. In a detailed analysis of William Beckford's *Vathek* he comments that the supernatural appears as an extension of a rhetorical figure, realizing the literal sense of a figurative expression (Todorov 1975: 79). Further he extends this important observation on the whole genre of the fantastic:

The number and variety of the examples clearly show that we are not concerned here with an individual feature of style, but with a property linked to the structure of the fantastic as a genre.

The different relations that we have observed between the fantastic and figurative discourse shed light on each other. If the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures, it is because it originates in them. The supernatural is born of language.¹ It is both its consequence and its proof... The supernatural thereby becomes a symbol of language, just as the figures of rhetoric do, and the figure is, as we have seen, the purest form of literality (Todorov 1975: 82).

As a result of the process of animation the figurative meaning of the trope is neutralized. From a stylistic device the trope changes into a narrative device, giving the story a powerful push forwards. It is true that the studies related to the animation of tropes are mainly carried out in the domain of the fantastic (Todorov 1975) and the literary fairy tale (Sutherland 1970; Dobzhinskaya 1990). However, the conclusions these scholars came to are relevant in the case of the traditional fairy tale too, especially if we admit that in its broadest sense the folk fairy tale can be held as fitting in the genre of the fantastic.

Normally in cases described above only the animated phrase is present in the text whereas the rhetorical figure itself may be absent. Many of them can be easily restored owing to the fact that they are hackneyed figures, known to the listeners or readers. However, in such instances it is difficult to state the type of the extended trope, for the animation of both simile and metaphor may result in identical structures. To use the terms of Tzvetan Todorov the animated phrase and the figure can be said to be in “diachronic” relations. Here is a folk tale passage where the animation of the simile *tears flew like a river* is rather obvious. The passage is taken from the Armenian tale *The Wicked Woman*. It is recorded by Margarit Grigorian in 1949 and included in her collection of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) folk tales. The teller is a peasant woman Araksya Hambardsumian.

A poor maiden is persecuted by her heartless stepmother for having lost a piece of bread. After futile efforts to find it, she proceeds to the forest:

Shedding many tears she wandered and looked for the lost bread. She cried so much that her tears became a river and flowed. The waters of that river reached a shepherd. The shepherd drank of the river and felt it was salty. At this he was very surprised and decided to find out where the water was coming from. He walked a long way and a short way and finally saw a girl who was crying bitterly (Abrahamyan 1966b: 615).

The quoted phrase *her tears became a river* is to be understood and interpreted literally. In case of alternative, i.e. metaphoric interpretation, the succeeding text may be under threat of logical and semantic collapse.²

The magic transformation of tears into a river has a distinct narrative function: only through a river of tears can the stepdaughter reach the shepherd and be rescued from the persecutions of her cruel stepparent. It is interesting that writing about the lack of descriptions of the emotional state of folk tale personages, Max Lüthi has rightly commented on a related tale text:

If a folktale hero sits down crying on a stone because he is at a loss over how to help himself, we are not told this so as to be shown the state of his soul, but because in such a situation it is just this kind of reaction on the part of the hero that leads to contact with an otherworldly helper (Lüthi 1986: 14).

It is also possible to claim that the river in this example is a disguised temporal unit paralleling the flow of time. Sorrow becomes a unique time module: tears turn into a repetitive pattern measuring it. On such a backdrop Cummings's famous *a grief ago* seems more understandable. It is a well-known fact that the fairy tale narrative seldom includes accurate temporal information. It prefers specific, often oblique means of denoting time continuum. The passage of time here can be covertly implied with the help of iron boots getting worn, a handful of raisins being eaten, etc.

To compare, we consider an analogous episode from Tattercoats included in Joseph Jacob's collection of English fairy tales. Here tears are shown as a time pattern even more explicitly:

So he turned his back, and sat by his window looking out over the sea, and weeping great tears for his lost daughter, till his white hair and beard grew down over his shoulders and twined round his chair and crept into the chinks of the floor, and his tears, dropping on to the window-ledge, wore a channel through the stone, and ran away in a little river to the great sea (Jacobs 1993: 281).

As in the Armenian example, it is possible to claim that the phrase *his tears, dropping on to the window-ledge, wore a channel through the stone, and ran away in a little river to the great sea* emerges at the expense of the animation of a trope (either a simile, *tears flew like a river*, or a hyperbole, *a river of tears* etc). The window through which the river of tears flows towards the sea may stand as a masked metaphor for the eye shedding tears.

In a number of tales the original rhetorical figure is present and precedes the extended phrase. The tale shows the tropes and their animation in the same textual cut. Here we are faced with synchronic relations:

The figure and the supernatural are present on the same level, and their relation is functional, not “etymological”. Here the appearance of the fantastic element is preceded by a series of comparisons, of figurative or simply idiomatic expressions, quite common in ordinary speech but designating, if taken literally, a supernatural event – the very one that will occur at the end of the story (Todorov 1975: 79).

The following stretch of narrative is taken from the Armenian folk tale *Sadaphia Khanum* (Dame Mother-of-Pearl). It was recorded by Gevorg Sherents and included in his beautiful collection of Van (historical Armenia) folk tales.

*By lord’s command the maiden jumped out of the sea hollow. The sea waves took her and brought to a piece of land. She looked around and saw nothing except the bottomless sea and the vast fields. Neither men nor beasts could be seen. Sometimes birds would come down from the sky and then fly back again. The maiden cried, cried and **the tears from her eyes flowed down and fell around her like beads of pearl** – so much for the maiden.*

*Another Queen had sworn that if she had a boy child may it remain in the shape of a bird for seven years before marrying the girl he would choose. Now the six years had already passed. Once the prince came down the island and what did he see there but a fairy-like girl. She was helpless – naked and bare-footed, hungry and thirsty. Immediately the bird flew to houses, which had laundry hanging on the lines, stole some clothes from here and there and covered the girl’s body. **Her tears, which had turned into pearls**, he gathered and put into a box. Then he took the maiden on his wings and flew her to his house (Sherents 1899: 101).*

In the quoted passage we can easily identify the expression *the tears from her eyes fell down like beads of pearls* as a simile. Further in the narrative the tears change into real pearls. It is interesting that the narrator represents this transformation in a rather casual way, which is seen even on the level of syntax: it is set in a subordinate clause. The named transformation is important on the narrative level. It is not by chance that the birdman hides the pearl-tears into a box. Later they could serve as a kind of proof of her grief for losing her lover, as tokens of her devotion to him. The box is reminiscent of the lachrymal vases or tear bottles in Oriental cultures meant to show the truthfulness and love of the wife for her absent husband.

In times old and new tears of a woman have been associative of womanliness. In many cultures the brides are supposed to cry at the wedding party. There seems to exist an almost misogynic belief stating: *the crying woman is a*

beautiful woman. This attitude is relevant in our days too: tears as a symbol of womanliness is often used by top fashion designers. In his 1998 show the House of Dior presented an embroidered hair net. The model wearing it had pearl tears on her eyes (L'official 1998: 16). The Italian firm La Perla advertised women's underwear showing a model with tears flowing down her cheeks; the association between pearls and tears being more than obvious (Harper's Bazaar 2002, April).

It is important to mention that the extension of rhetoric figures is not merely a means of developing the story but also reveals implicit layers of characterization, which may remain blocked in case the rhetoric figure is not animated. Fairy tale heroines crying in pearl tears are very often renounced children, daughters of absent or passive fathers, offspring of abandoned women. Though the father in this tale does not literally renounce his daughter he does not object to the readiness of his wicked spouse to let the girl be devoured by the snake – prince. The only help the girl may hope to get is the advice of her late mother. In many tales the gift of crying in pearl tears is bestowed upon the girl child at her very birth or at the christening. Let us consider the following passage:

One day three women came to their house. Each of them made a good wish for the child. The first woman said, "I will give her such a beauty that whoever sees her will be enchanted and will love her immensely". The second woman said, "I will give the girl strength to grow in a day as much as other children grow in a year". When she cries may pearls drop off her eyes instead of tears. When she laughs may roses and violets fall down from her mouth and may precious stones appear on the ground she treads on. The third woman said, "I am giving her a cross which will make her immortal as long as she keeps it hung from her neck" (Abrahamyan 1966a: 42).

Curiously, similar episodes in their turn can be understood allegorically as they are reminiscent of actual baptismal rites current in Armenia until now: when a girl child is being christened, those present often cast gold and pearls into the baptismal water.

To confirm the view narrated above let us mention that the tale Dame Mother of Pearl includes other story elements denoting the heroine's status of a renounced daughter. Heeding to the advice of her deceased parent the girl dresses herself in a hedgehog's skin.

Girl, she said, "Why are you crying? Get up and listen what I will tell you".

When they take you to the King's palace tell them to give you a hedgehog's skin. Draw the skin on your face, sit right in front of the snake and look into its eyes (Sherents 1899: 100).

Apart from its defensive function an animal skin as clothing has a very distinct signification in a great number of fairy tales. It points to the status of the disowned child, mostly a female child. In a close version of the tale, recorded by Bishop Garegin Servantsian, the heroine is clad in a buffalo skin, known as a strong means of protection not only in fairy tales but also in the Armenian epic (Servantsian 1978: 492). In this particular tale the girl herself admits and exposes her disgrace, the disgrace of being cast in front of a monster by her own parents. The disgrace of being renounced may suggest a voluntary self-abasement, a self-willed deed acknowledging and displaying the hurting status of the disowned child. Comparable examples can be easily found in folklores of most cultures.

At the same time wearing animal skins or plant clothes instead of proper outfits is a kind of silent reproach, a challenge addressed to the cruel or, in this case, indifferent parent. No wonder in some fairy tales the degraded characters clad in strange clothes conceal their former names, in this manner renouncing their descent and their parents, the father in the first place.³ Thus, before marrying the snake prince the heroine is nameless.

Wearing habits made of animal furs, skins or plants is renouncing also one's own kind and even hints at a partial shape-shifting. The heroine chooses to show herself as a beast, a non-human. Where a human is under threat coming from his likes, an animal or a plant can survive. It is not accidental that in several tales of the Donkeyskin cycle the personage does not merely wear an animal skin but actually changes into one.

It is true that wearing unusual clothes might have another signification in fairy tale narratives: it implies the character's pre-matrimonial status, her passage from maidenhood to womanhood, the temporary fall before achieving a higher, royal status through marrying a prince. Ruth Bottigheimer defines such stories as restoration tales (Bottigheimer 2002: 11).

Wearing herbal clothes means that one is not dressed properly but is not naked either. In this sense, tales of this series remind very much those relating of the clever maiden expected to be taken to marriage on condition she appears neither dressed nor naked, to put the marriage condition into Grimm's terms: *komm zu mir nicht gekleidet, nicht nackend [--] und wenn du das kannst, will ich dich heiraten*.

Understandably, in the case of synchronic arrangement of the figure and its extension the animated phrase succeeds the rhetoric figure. Probably a unique

case when the animated phrase precedes the trope is found in Grimms' *Mother Hulda*:

What are you afraid of, my dear child? Come and live with me, and if you do the house-work well and orderly, things shall go well with you. You must take great pains to make my bed well and shake it up thoroughly, so that the feathers fly, and then in the world it snows, for I am Mother Hulda (Grimm 1993: 207).

And further:

As the old woman spoke so kindly, the girl took courage, consented, and went to her work. She did everything to the old woman's satisfaction, and shook the bed with such a will that the feathers flew about like snowflakes: and so she led a good life, had never a cross word, but boiled and roast meat every day (Grimm 1993: 129).

Here the order of appearance of the mentioned structures is reversed and it is permissible to conclude that the reversion was done owing to the interference of the recorders. The folk version could hardly have the simile succeeding the metamorphosis.

Often relations between a figure and its extension are revealed between two different versions of a tale or tales of different types. Thus the fairy tale *Nouri Hadige* (The Pomegranate Seed), the Armenian version of Snow White involves an implicit comparison of the young heroine's beauty to a pomegranate. She is as white and red as a pomegranate. This version was recorded by Susie Hoogasian Villa in the USA from the words of her grandmother, a Van immigrant:

There was once a rich man who had a very beautiful wife and a beautiful daughter called Nourie Hadig (tiny piece of pomegranate). Every month, when the moon appeared in the sky, the wife asked: "New moon, am I the most beautiful or are you?"

And every month the Moon replied, "You are the most beautiful".

But when Nourie Hadig came to be fourteen years of age, she was so more beautiful than her mother that the moon was forced to change her answer. One day when the mother asked the moon her constant question, the Moon answered: "I am not the most beautiful nor are you. The father's and mother's only child Nourie Hadig is the most beautiful of all." Nourie Hadig was ideally named because her skin was perfectly white and she had rosy cheeks. And if you have ever seen a pome-

granate, you know that it had red pulpy seeds with a red skin which has a pure white lining (Hoogassian Villa 1966: 85).

An explicit simile might have been lost through the almost synchronic translation. S. H. Villa's tales are unique in that they are the English recordings of folk tales narrated in Armenian, a rather rare case in the recording of Armenian tales.

Another version of this tale, which is recorded in Van and published already in 1885, explains the origin of the child's name differently.

Once there was a woman. One day she was sweeping the couch and found on it a grain of pomegranate, which she threw into her mouth and ate. By the end of nine months, nine days and nine minutes she gave birth to a fairylike pretty daughter and called her Nar Khatyun⁴ (Pomegranate Queen) (Sherents 1885: 106).

In this version of the tale the comparison is neutralized giving way to the supernatural, the birth of a girl child as a result of swallowing a seed of pomegranate.

We suggest that in folk tale, as different from the literary fairy tale, the dichotomy trope and its extension is mediated by a masked transitional link, mostly a folk belief or some kind of superstition. The animated phrase is the extension of not so much the rhetoric figure but the folk belief. If we consider the above quoted passages we will see that the simile ***a girl as red and white as a pomegranate*** and the extended phrase ***a girl is born from a pomegranate seed*** are interceded with the folk belief according to which most Armenian women when pregnant crave for pomegranates possibly owing to the sour-sweet taste of this succulent fruit added to its highly nutritional value. Additionally, this belief is paralleled by others stating the appearance of the child to be born depends on the food the pregnant mother craves for or looks at.⁵ It will not be far-fetched to assume there might have been a folk medical belief according to which if a pregnant woman eats pomegranates she will bear a beautiful child.⁶ In many tales this fruit denotes outstanding, often non-human beauty. Fairy maidens are believed to be enclosed in pomegranates and are born as brides for human Princes. In such cases the fruit serves as a kind of womb where the child is enclosed and thus is not very different from impregnation from a seed of pomegranate. On the other hand, such narrative episodes can be explained as an echo of child marriages being in practice in Armenia in the past.

Analogous relations between a trope and its enlivened variant can be revealed between tales belonging to diverse cultures. A good example is the

German Snow White and the Russian Snegourochka (Snow Maiden). Snow White is as white as snow; Snegourochka is a girl made/born of snow. The two are mediated by the belief that a child's appearance is dependent on things, snow, for example, its mother looked upon when pregnant. Judging from Alexander Pushkin's version of *Snow White*, in Russia it was believed that snow gazing would help to bear a white skinned child:

*By what right is she my rival?
Such young folly I shall bridle.
So she's grown up – me to spite!
Little wonder she's so white:
With her bulging mother gazing
At that snow – what's so amazing!* (Pushkin 1973: 3).

Of importance, the translation of similar tales requires accuracy. Thus, one of the oldest Russian translations of Brothers Grimm, published in 1893, presents the simulative name Snow White as *Snegourochka* (Snow Maiden). Semantically the “translated” name of the personage was discrepant. This blemish in the translation of the name is explained in the translator's notes to the text, where he writes about his attempt to find counterparts for the German characters in Russian folk culture rather than translate their names literally.

An almost identical mistake was found in the Armenian translation of the Grimms. Snow White was translated as *Dzunanuysh* meaning a snow fairy or a snow maiden. The seemingly innocuous translation mistake resulted in a rather serious change in the meaning of the story; the human child was transformed into a supernatural creature. We must admit, though, that the translation error was easily neutralized in the very context of the tale, which shows unambiguously that Snow White is the offspring of human parents. Later translators of the tale made an attempt to correct the mistake by coining the literal translation of Snow White *Spitakadzunik*. Though more accurate, this variant sounds rather unnatural. At the moment both names are current in the Armenian translations of both the Grimm tale and Disney's story. A solution of this problem would probably consist in admitting that the word *Dzunanuysh* has simply acquired a second meaning of *a girl as white as snow*.

COMMENTS

¹ It seems important to add that in certain genres, in Nonsense literature, for instance, the enlivening of a trope or a literal understanding of an idiom may not result in the supernatural but will rather create a comic effect. A sea/river of tears in a fairy tale

expresses the sufferings of the personage and at the same time moves the narrative forward. The pool of tears Carroll's Alice and the 'curious animals' swim in is meant to cause only a humorous effect.

² Let us mention that the literal understanding of a narrative does not exclude its possible symbolic interpretation. Thus, to have a deeper insight into the meaning of this narrative passage we can refer to a Jungian interpretation. In terms of such an approach, crying is seen as the beginning of initiation which in view of the plot development of numerous similar tales is difficult to disagree with:

Tears are a river that takes you somewhere. Weeping creates a river around the boat that carries your soul-life. Tears lift your boat off the rocks, off dry ground, carrying it downriver to someplace new, someplace better.

A woman's crying has been considered quite dangerous, for it loosens the locks and bolts on the secrets she bears. But in truth, for the sake of a woman's wild soul it is better to cry. For women, tears are the beginning of initiation into the Scar Clan, that timeless tribe of women of all colors, all nations, all languages, who down through the ages have lived through a great something, and yet who stood proud (Estés 1996: 374).

³ If placed into the Armenian context, namelessness can be accounted for by a different reason. Formerly, in certain regions of Armenia girls did not have names but were called by their father's names, the word *daughter* added to it.

⁴ *Lady, queen* in Turkish.

⁵ Greeks, for example, used to throw black pepper on expectant mothers on St. Simon's day. This was supposed to cause moles on the child, etc. (Daniels & Stevans 1971: 39).

⁶ Interestingly, in other cultures pomegranate was among the fruit tabooed for the pregnant. According to Daniel's and Stevans's *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences* Albanian women are discouraged to eat pomegranate or bad luck will come to their child (Daniels & Stevans 1971: 39).

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