

Introduction

"Where is |kaang [God]?"
"We don't know, but the elands do."
!king, a San storyteller

Stories provide us with truth; they take the flotsam and jetsam of our lives, and give those shards a sense of narrative, of form, and therefore of verity. But that truth is slippery, and a crucial characteristic of stories is that they can be revised, are in fact constantly in the process of being modified. So if story is truth, then truth is never absolute, is never wholly one thing, not another. And so it is that historians routinely take the events of the past and give them a new gloss, recasting the stories again and again. So it is that heroic stories are revised, retold, and yesterday's heroism becomes a distinctly unheroic kind of villainy today. History is a story that is never wholly told, never entirely true, but always at least partially true, always true at least in its parts: the events keep sliding around, as each storyteller, each historian, re-arranges the incidents, reinterprets, retells, and meaning alters—often slightly, sometimes more dramatically, with audiences providing a necessary set of contemporary emotional reactions. The events of the past are never sealed. Story provides insight but never closure. These traditions are in the care of the storytellers.¹ The substance of history depends on "my feelings," argues the historian.²

What does the fact that meaning is largely emotional suggest about traditional ways of analyzing story?

Storytelling, especially that occurring in oral societies, has often been misinterpreted, many seeking to reduce the stories to rudimentary Aesop's fable morality, to obvious homily, while missing the true messages of the stories. Those who have studied narrative, moreover, have too frequently sought mathematical certitude in organization, while missing the real power of the stories. We begin this examination of story with four scenes:

SCENE ONE: IMAGE AND EMOTION

First, a scene in Zululand, along the southeastern coast of Africa. The story is over, the performer moving now into the audience, as the men and women in the gathering disperse, discussing her performance. Each member of the audience seems to be walking away with his or her own very personal interpretation of the story. It is clear that there is a core area of agreement: the surface moral of the story, no one disagrees with that—"That is obvious," they say, suggesting that it is so apparent that it is hardly worthy of further analysis. And there is clear consensus regarding the formal elements of the story—"Is that not plain?" they wonder, as the patterning of the story is appraised. The diversity of interpretation has to do with biography and history, with the way the contemporary images interact with the ancient fantasy imagery. But much of the interpretation is framed in experiences only hinted at by the storyteller. It becomes evident that members of the audience, as their individual emotions are elicited and then woven into the form of the performance, bring their own predilections, hopes, fears, experiences into the story as well. The story becomes a focal point for harmonizing the idiosyncratic experiences and histories of the members of the audience; it occurs within the context of the audience's emotions.

SCENE TWO: NARRATIVE

What meaning is conveyed by story? The question can be answered on several levels. On the most obvious level is the didactic message that flows easily across the surface of the tale. That is the one that audiences may take away with them intellectually, but it is not the one that touches them emotionally. The fact that meaning or message is essentially constructed of feeling makes the story somewhat difficult to discuss at times, emotions being complex and generally untidy entities.

This second scene is situated among the Ndebele people in the southern part of Zimbabwe. Eva Ndlovu, a forty-five-year-old Ndebele woman, is about to perform before an audience a story about tradition and an old woman:

It is reported.

There was long ago an old woman who regularly traveled with children when they went to dig ochre. This particular ochre, in the place where they dug it, was beautiful in an exceedingly wonderful way.

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Eva Ndlovu, a Ndebele storyteller in Zimbabwe, works the complex of images that she has evoked into a linear narrative strand. At the same time, she works the images into metaphorical relationships; one set of images mirrors another set of images, and frequently that mirroring is revealed in the physical behavior of the members of the audience. She never allows the didactic elements of her story to overwhelm the emotional and formal.

This old woman would warn people that it was not desirable that children who had grown and were already old, women who were no longer virgins, should travel to that place. It was desirable that those who travel there be children who were still very young, children who had not yet grown and become experienced, young girls before they became older girls.

Nevertheless, on one particular day, some women did make the trip, seeking the ochre in that place where it was traditionally dug, on this day going against the word of this old woman.

At this ochre pit, there was a big snake which swallowed people. It was said that on some days the snake would swallow the ochre itself, to prevent people from reaching the place where the ochre had been.

These women went on and they came upon this snake. It kept them from moving to the place where the ochre was.

So it was that they burst into song:

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“Oh, Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
 Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
 We had thought it was only a fantasy tale,
 Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
 Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
 We had thought it was only a fantasy tale,
 Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!”

Then this snake swallowed all these women who did not follow tradition, who did not travel with the old woman who should have journeyed with them.

On another day, other women traveled, and they too came upon the snake. Along the way, they walked with the old woman who was exhausted by the wandering. And when they came to this place, they massaged and scratched the snake pleasantly, they caressed it good-naturedly. Then it disgorged the women who had disobeyed the injunction. These women came out. Because they were very tall inside the snake, its bones had softened. It had licked them, it had licked and licked them, then had swallowed them; yet they had lived inside its stomach, and it did not die.

The old woman told them, “You see what happens when you go against the tradition of the ancients. People who do not heed custom are consumed, they have not followed patterns of behavior prescribed in ancient times. Nothing goes well for those who do not listen to the values of the people of old. You ought to listen when your elders tell you something.”

It is said that children in those days were different. They used to dig ochre and do things properly, and the vessels would be fashioned, those for cooking, those for dipping water, those for brewing beer, and they molded these objects; they were beautiful and touched with ochre. But sometimes they breached custom, and they would come and not find the ochre that they needed. Instead, they were confronted by the snake, and they would not get to the place where the ochre was dipped; they would find that the snake had closed the place up, and they would run back home. Those who heeded the injunction, when they arrived and found the snake there, they would plead with it; it would go away and hide, and they would dig up the ochre, then depart.

The old woman told them, “You see, all the things you do without telling me will not have a good issue, will not succeed.”

These women who obeyed custom would travel with this old woman. Some would get young men to help them at the place

where the ochre was dug; others would meet young men there—they traveled on vehicles and dug up this clay, digging it up for their grandmothers. They would get this white, beautiful stone ochre. Those who had not breached custom, to whom nothing untoward had happened there in the valley, they would go to search for ochre. And they would return as they had come. Before they went, they prepared cooked provisions. Some of that food they would eat during the time that they were searching for ochre. If they did not find it, they would turn back.

Those who heeded the old woman, listened closely to her words, would arrive, and dig and dig until they obtained the ochre. The ochre of that place was such that those who went on their own way, disregarding custom, their bodies would get tired, and they would become exhausted without having come to the ochre. These women would get there and, even if they would sing for the snake, this very snake:

“Oh, Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
We had thought it was only a fantasy tale,
Spirit of the place,”

it would swallow them, disregarding their song. These others, whenever they came, they would sing; the old woman would lead the chanting and they would sing along:

“Oh, Spirit of the place, Spirit of the place, we cry to you!
We had thought it was only a fantasy tale,
Spirit of the place!”

And the snake would go away, leaving them to dig their ochre. They would get the ochre, then return home to wash their pots. That is how it ends.³

The tale seems a strongly didactic one,⁴ the preachments seeming to render the story itself secondary. But it is that story lurking behind the homiletic observations about tradition that affects the members of the audience and that concerns us here. A message is attached to a particularly potent image, that of a swallowing monster. Storytellers have traditionally tied such moralizing to colorful imagery.⁵ The story rests, it is clear, on an interdiction: only children can go to dig ochre; older children, women who are not virgins, should not go. The digging of ochre, and its later application to the body, is a part of a girl's puberty rite of

passage. But one day some women do make the trip, breaking the interdiction, "going against the word of this old woman."

Now the storyteller introduces her fantasy image, a swallowing monster, one of the most venerable, useful, and evocative of images. This swallower is a snake that guards the place. It swallows "all these women who did not obey the law, who did not travel with the old woman who should have traveled with them." That is the rhythmical pattern: women going to the ochre pit and to the snake, a place with positive and negative possibilities. The first group of women, because they went against tradition, are swallowed by the snake; the second group of women, following tradition, traveling with the old woman, who represents tradition, massage the snake and cause it to disgorge the first group of women. Then the old woman becomes even more clearly hortatory, speaking of the necessity of following tradition. The storyteller emphasizes this by explaining again what happens when people obey custom, what happens when they go against custom.

But this message is not the power of the story, nor is it necessarily its primary purpose, its central meaning. Certainly, based on my conversations with them, it is not what the members of this particular audience carried away from the performance. What is crucial here is the fantasy image and the rhythmical organization of that image. The force of the story has to do with the vulnerability of the humans who move into a place of danger and mystery. The images of death and rebirth evoke emotions, and those feelings are worked into form by means of patterning: that is the force and the purpose of the story. The theme is obvious, but even if it were not, it is not the main interest here. Story has to do with emotions: that is the meaning of this story, it is the essence of storytelling.

SCENE THREE: RHYTHM

The formal elements of storytelling are complex, and consist of far more than the linear plotting of images. Consider this scene: outside, in a kraal in the Transkei in South Africa, Thembeke Ngcobo, a Xhosa child, is learning to tell stories from the Xhosa oral tradition. But it is not the cause and effect movement of images that concerns her. Indeed, it is her casual disregard of such niceties that brings one to wonder about the primacy of place frequently given to that most obvious aspect of storytelling. Instead, she places her emphasis on repetition, on patterning, on the rhythm of performance. And the children in her audience delight in these patterns, physically moving with them, their feelings

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A youthful Xhosa storyteller, Thembeke Ngcobo, calmly moves into her story, having mastered the rhythmical organizing tools so essential to the development of the narrative. The young storyteller first gains command of the rhythm.

happily given over to the youthful raconteur as she works these emotions into form.

That is the essence of storytelling: a story well told is not simply a movement from a conflict to a resolution. That will be present in the girl's stories, but later. Just now, she is working on mastering the more important elements of the craft. The child learns early that rhythm is the essence of story, that of the two forms of organization of image repetition is far more important than linearity.

SCENE FOUR: TROPE

Story begins with the emotion-evocative image. Contemplate this scene in South Africa—on a frieze of paintings preserved on a rock wall in the Drakensberg Mountains, cloaked human figures can be seen beneath and overlying paintings of elands.⁶ In ancient San societies in this region, images were carved into rocks, just as in dance they were sculpted with human bodies, as in myth they were shaped by the words of the mythmaker.⁷ Rock painting, this most venerable of art forms, reveals significant relationships with storytelling. In painting,

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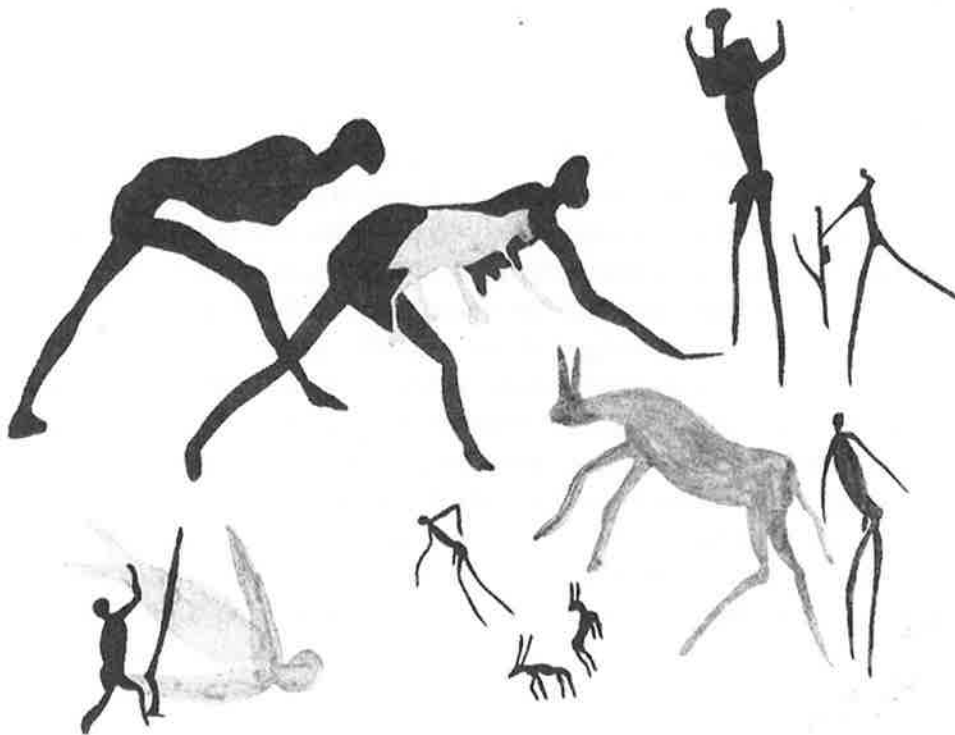


It is in San rock paintings that one sees visually what occurs verbally and emotionally in storytelling. A form of purposeful palimpsest is evident in an ancient San rock painting: the contemporary hunting scene is superimposed over images of the gods, and trope is created.

as in dance and myth, patterned image becomes trope, the substance of storytelling. Each of these art forms moves rhythmically, in the process creating deliberately concealed strata of meaning, establishing a complex interaction between the surface layer and underlying layers, and so giving rise to metaphor.

The key to unraveling the complexity of the myth, and the relationship between myth and rock painting, is masquerade: illusion, disguise, deception. There is a deliberately ambiguous rendering of mythic characters in the stories, as there is a blurring of humans into animals in the dances, and a merging of humans, gods, and animals in the rock paintings. In the stories and paintings, human figures are sometimes partially animal, and in the metaphorical layering, animals and humans blend. Humans wear animal masks—in the paintings, there is a half-human, half-antelope figure, a man wearing an eland skin; animals are mimed by humans in the dances; the mantis in the myths is a complex combination of perfect god, flawed human, and future animal. Nature, gods, humans—a delicate merging of the categories occurs in San painting and story.⁸

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The rock paintings and engravings of San civilization reach deep into human history. San painters created two kinds of figures on the walls of rocks: one was a somewhat realistic depiction of contemporary figures, often hunters and their quarry; the other was strange, seemingly fantasy characters, masked, godlike. The San painters and engravers celebrated life, its rituals, its hopes, its joys, the ordered excitement of dance, the necessity and intensity of the hunt. The artists painted human figures in the process of movement, arresting the motions of the hunt, of the dance, of friendship and camaraderie. The gap between the human world and the celestial realm is readily bridged.

In the rock paintings, there are scenes that seem to be realistic. Afrikaner farmers attack San cattle raiders,⁹ herdsmen separate cattle from horses,¹⁰ San fight one another,¹¹ horsemen ride abreast.¹² There are figures in the paintings that are not apparently naturalistic—these are masked figures, cloaked figures, flying figures. They are the ambiguous characters that make possible the essential transformations that are at the heart of the paintings, and that link the paintings to myths and dances. A painting depicts a human figure chasing a young antelope while its mother follows.¹³ And there are many paintings of elands.¹⁴ Women clap the rhythm as men dance in a painting.¹⁵

This layering of imagery imposes a metaphorical artistic activity on

the audience. By superimposing images that seem diverse, the artist causes the audience to wonder about the relationship, the kinship, the linkage, and then to begin the poetic figurative act, that of discovering the nature of the relationship—and its significance. This begins with narrative linearity, proceeds to a participation in an artistic layering activity, and so leads to meaning. In San oral narrative, the same activity occurs as in rock painting, only in this case the overlay is achieved verbally. But an identical metaphorical activity is thereby encouraged.

A San artist blurs the gulf between the world of humans and that of animals: in a rock painting at Giant's Castle Game Reserve in the Natal Drakensberg, San hunters wear antelope head masks.¹⁶ In another painting at the same site, two hunters wear antelope head masks, one of the hunters carrying two small buck. This painting is situated over paintings of hartebeest and a cloaked figure.¹⁷ A San performer, examining paintings depicting men with rhebok's heads, concluded, "They were men who had died and now lived in rivers, and were spoilt at the same time as the elands and by the dances of which you have seen paintings."¹⁸ In rock art, the storytellers purposefully layer images to move to metaphor, with contemporary images of hunters, for example, painted over ancient images of the gods and fantasy creatures: a half-man, half-mantis is painted.¹⁹ An elaborate painting shows running San figures and a procession of Bantu-speaking people, against paintings of elands.²⁰ Hand imprints are mixed with a large painting of an elephant and a flight of birds.²¹ Elephants, tsessebe, and humans mingle, painted one on top of the other.²² A recumbent eland overlies the legs of tall human figures. Other elands are also in the painting.²³ A cloaked figure appears in a painting, under pictures of buck.²⁴ Depictions of various antelope, hartebeest, and eland appear in the paintings, along with human figures, one wearing a headdress of animal ears, some of them cloaked, with much layering of imagery.²⁵ The same dynamic image layering can be seen in other parts of the same area.²⁶

This kind of overlay is not a constant. In both rock art and oral art, much of the imagery is not so organized, but involves simply realistic or impressionistic views of nature and the real world. A relationship and a tension are set up between realistic images, a layering of imagery, with experience of metaphor the result.²⁷ The meanings of the rock paintings have preoccupied a number of observers; efforts have been made to link the paintings to San oral tradition and belief.²⁸

The same capturing of a narrative moment occurs, then, in both San painting and story. In the paintings, especially evident in those that are superimposed one on top of the other, there is a dramatic—and narrative—merging of human, animal, and mythical figures, a blending of human, animal, and mythical identities. This is why dis-

guise is such a crucial characteristic of both art forms. Subjects of the rock paintings range from fairly realistic, naturalistic portraits to more aggressively abstract renderings achieved through such layering. The paintings of masked hunters and dancers, of flying figures, of cloaked beings are sufficiently ambiguous to become the devices that make the blending possible. The effect in the paintings is to trap the mythic moment in form, much as a tale does. The tale achieves this cessation of time much as painting does, at least partially by means of patterning of imagery. To understand the complexities of San artistic thought, whether in storytelling or painting, one must appreciate the stark beauty of San metaphor, a figurative imaged expression made possible by rhythmic patterning. It is metaphor and myth that San storytelling fosters, and it is with these fundamental and poetically linked aspects of storytelling that we begin this journey into narrative.

"Where is God?" He is there, on the wall and in the word, his image layered over by the elands.²⁹

ARGUMENT

The Zulu audience, the Ndebele storyteller, the Xhosa child, the San artist provide the argument for the discussion about storytelling that follows. It is this combination of image and emotion, of narrative movement, of form or pattern, and the layering of imagery that results in story. If the contemporary Xhosa child reveals the patterning that is basic to all storytelling, the ancient rock paintings of the San people of southern Africa reveal the complexities of storytelling in the juxtaposing or layering of images. The artists create stories by overlaying images, achieving a richness not available in a temporal array of images.

We begin our study with fantasy—images that are inherited by storytellers and that are brought into relationship with contemporary, generally realistic images. Then we move to the narrative organization of these images, the linear movement of the story. It is pattern and rhythm that are the chief organizing factors in story, however, and these must be considered along with the emotions that constitute them. These images, movements, and patterns have as their goal the layering of image experiences, as the storyteller moves her audience into trope.

Storytelling is today the province of historians,³⁰ law scholars,³¹ psychoanalysts,³² as well as students of literature.³³ Story has always been used to provide connections between the present and the past, to study and explain the past within the context of the present, and vice versa.

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The past has never been frozen in time: it has always been a restless repository of images, the snippets and parings of human existence, brought to life in contemporary times by storytellers who have agendas of their own, and so it is that history is also revisionist history. Does story provide an index to the past in the sense that the past can be perfectly reconstructed—as it happened? But how did it happen? And surely the way it happened and what happened depend on the point of view.³⁴

Story is an artful mixing of images by means of pattern, drawing on and working within two contexts, the past and the present. Images from the past typically have an emotional content, or the capacity and the character to elicit emotions when brought into contact with contemporary, more realistic images. It is this junction that is the flashpoint of storytelling, where everything that is significant occurs, the place of tropes, a mutual resonating channeling between past and present. Patterning assures that the diversity of imagery is united in a metaphorical or metonymic relationship that is at the core of storytelling, and performance joins the members of the audience to these disparate images.

Simpler stories prepare the way, providing basic materials and conditioning the audience for these more crucial metaphorical, metonymic, tropic experiences. Story is a blurring, a coming together of signifier and signified. The word, rhythmically cradled, creates a view of the signified that is not a reproduction but an accepted and acceptable artistic rendering, an image: not reality, not even an imitation of reality, but a new, novel world composed of images *derived* from and *partaking* in images in reality but *not* reality: this is fantasy. We know the stories; we know their endings, the metaphors, the metonymies, all. It is the exhilaration of experiencing something new at the same time it is a recognition of what we know already. What is inventive, what is singular is what the storyteller does with what is familiar. The essence of storytelling is rhythm: the patterning of distinct categories of imagery in a linear movement that takes members of the audience into an experience of metaphor. And the formal elements of story are a necessary part of its message.

Image is the basic element of storytelling. For our purposes, we shall consider two categories of imagery. One contains the images commonly called motifs, often fantasy, usually old, always capable of eliciting strong emotional responses from members of audiences. These are the essential ingredients of the storyteller's repertory. The second category of imagery is contemporary images, typically realistic. Of the two categories of imagery, these are the least stable. It is the function of the storyteller to weave these two kinds of imagery—the ancient images that encapsulate the deepest dreams, hopes, fears, and nightmares of a

society, and the contemporary images that record the evanescent world of experience—into a single strand.

The image is plotted into a linear path. Narrative is the linear movement of those realistic and fantasy images, as the storyteller charts or plots them from conflict to resolution. This is the most obvious element of storytelling, and it has considerable potential for manipulation. Linear narrative involves cause-and-effect movement in the story, but while narrative as the linear movement of events from a conflict to a resolution is attractive as a definition of story, it is not the beginning of story, nor is it the significant constituent.

The images are patterned. Pattern, or rhythm, is storytelling's crucial dynamic process. This is the motor, the means whereby images and narrative movement are worked into meaning. At its simplest, patterning is a transparent repetition of sets of images; this becomes more and more sophisticated, more subtle, as stories become more complex. As the linear movement of the story develops, the fantasy and realistic images are patterned, and worked into a single texture during which they are unified and melded. Then masking, or metaphor, occurs.

Patterned emotion-evocative imagery is worked into trope. Metaphor, the end of image, narrative, and pattern, is the inner realm of the story. It is the aesthetic experience, the storyteller's sanctorum where, alchemically, the message is generated. Here is where patterning achieves its poetic fullness, where the two kinds of imagery join, where the audience is moved to an experience of meaning, where audience is imbued with meaning. Metaphor and its associated figures are the hidden terrain of the story: everything conspires to move the audience into this sanctum, this trope laboratory in which the emotions of the audience are elicited and ordered.

The image evokes feeling. The essential component in story is emotion. The four basic elements of storytelling exist to rouse, through evocative images, emotions, then to organize these emotions, rhythmically moving to trope which is not so much an intellectual as felt experience. The force of storytelling depends not simply on the surface facets of the story but on experiences of that familiar tale, on memories of the story sometimes only dimly recollected, memories that nevertheless resonate and echo through the experiences of the members of the audience, and on the immediacy of contemporary references in the story, sometimes provided not so much by the storyteller as by the real-life experiences of the audience.

Image, then, is organized by narrative plotting and by patterning, and trope is the result. The raw material of story is the emotions of performer and members of the audience—emotions of fear, delight, joy, irony, memory, present-day life, anger, hope, the emotions of vi-

carious living, emotions that are purged, that are stirred, emotions that are stored.

Emotions are the raw material here. Suzanne Langer wrote, ". . . only an image can hold us to a conception of a total phenomenon. . . ." ³⁵ She argued that the work of art does not consist "of ordinary emotion as we actually experience it." There is a "vitality," a "feeling," that marks works of the imagination, and this is not the same in calculated spatial forms. "It is this sort of vitality and feeling that constitutes the import of the work"; "it is conveyed entirely by artistic techniques, not by what is represented, for the represented objects could be recognized at once as 'the same' if a photographic or made-to-measure record of them were put beside the drawing or printing in which they figure." ³⁶ Still, argues Henry James, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life." ³⁷ Emotions and the representation of life: these are the materials of storytelling.

Imagery and its organization in cause-and-effect relationships are present, but they are the skeletal elements of story; they are not its living core. To ignore the emotions and to concentrate strictly on the obvious physical manipulation of images, to concentrate strictly on *fabula* and *sjuzet*, ³⁸ for example, of units and bundles, ³⁹ story and discourse, ⁴⁰ "a hierarchy of instances," ⁴¹ on story as "the narration of a succession of fictional events," ⁴² is to miss the purpose of storytelling. The crucial elements of storytelling are not the mechanical apparatus too frequently mistaken for story: the decisive constituents are music, dance, rhythm, pattern.

These are the four basic ingredients of story, then—image, linear and cyclical movement, trope—with their function being the evocation and molding of emotions into artistic forms. Other fundamental components of story include emotions, *doppelgänger*, and palimpsest, with trope interweaving them. The combination of these produces meaning. When a storyteller creates, it is always within at least four contexts, (a) the unique story itself, (b) but also involving other stories in the tradition that shadow the unique performance and that provide it with a networking frame, acting as a kind of *doppelgänger*, (c) and including the performer's own history, experiences, and feelings, a palimpsestic arrangement, (d) all within the context of the history, experiences, and feelings of the members of the audience, also a palimpsest.

It is true that telling stories involves the organization of events in a linear fashion, moving the events from conflict to resolution. But that is just the beginning. To end with narrative plotting of imagery, which is where many observers of story stop, is to miss the essence of storytelling. Narrative plotting is a device, not the end, of story. Meaning

can be found on that surface level of story, but more profound meaning is often not verbal, composed as it is of the emotions that have been elicited by the surface images, especially those that are imaginative.⁴³ Patterning is a second way of organizing images: that rhythmic ordering subverts the linear surface of the story, arranging the images in nontemporal fashion. The formal result is the essential message of story: patterning takes the emotions elicited by the images, and works them into form. There may be messages along the way, but the ultimate message of storytelling is the complex of emotions, diverse emotions evoked from the various members of the audience, each of whom has his or her own experience of story, his or her own desires and hopes: the sense of community engendered by story performance is the formal ordering of all of these emotions, outside the context of the storyteller, within the domain of the storyteller, in the individual members of the audience and in the collective responses of those members. Story is not merely a charting of images in mathematically precise ways. It is rather, like all art, the organization of feeling into form that is artistically compelling.

Involved in the performance of story, then, is image, realistic and fantasy. Two forms of organization of these images are linear plotting and rhythmical reorganization. The effect of the latter is trope, a form of organizing emotions.