Food for Thought

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At the end of his narrative poem, "Donkey-Skin,"
Charles Perrault makes the following ambiguous declaration:

The Tale of Donkey-Skin is hard to Believe,
But as long as the World has its Children,
Mothers, and Grandmothers,
The Tale will be Recalled.

On the one hand, Perrault presumptuously attributes immortality to his own creation, since he expects generation upon generation of mothers and grandmothers to read it to their children. On the other hand, his statement also refers to the oral tale that readers already know, since they have heard it told again and again by their own mothers and grandmothers. Even before they read Perrault's poem, the tale is indelibly engraved in their memory.

This ambiguity is that of the paradox characterizing oral tales and written poems or stories. Writing down an oral tale ensures its recollection at a future moment, when it will again be repeated orally. The memory of the tale is preserved in the infrangible monument of signs which the writer erects through writing. Yet this monument can be erected only because its written signs repeat what was already inscribed in a memory far more ancient than the signs themselves. In other words, the tale that Perrault commits to paper is the *terminus ad quem* of a narrative orality, which is based on the permanence of the inscription of the tale in memory. Without this inscription, the tale
could not be repeated. In this sense, Perrault’s version of the story is but one among many, just one re-writing of the inscription.

In addition, however, Perrault’s tale is also the terminus a quo constituting the basis for a narrative orality. The guarantor of the latter is the poem that Perrault has finished writing, for it functions as the condition for the tale’s inscription within his own future memory.

There is the tale called “Donkey-Skin,” which I was told as a child. There is no written text, because I have not yet written down any part of the text, even though I have begun to compose it in my mind. It is a story that I have already told, a story that itself is nothing more than the repetition of what I myself was once told a long time ago, even though I cannot remember the moment when I first heard it, nor where or when it happened. It is as though I had always known this tale. There is no written text to date because everything is always already written down; there is no written text to date because nothing was ever nor is ever really written down.

And if I today write down what I once told to others, it is only because I have been able to situate myself in the unspecifiable space that marks the indiscernible difference separating what is oral from what is written.

Perrault placed himself in that space toward the end of the seventeenth century when he began to write the story of “Donkey-Skin.” My aim in retelling and repeating the story of this tale is twofold: I wish to demonstrate that Perrault occupied that site; and I want to point out that he deposited certain signs within the narrative which indicate that he was aware of occupying this particular space.

The following interpretation is part of a larger study that I dedicated to Perrault’s verse rendition of “Donkey-Skin,” which was written in 1694 and published in 1695 in a thin little booklet. The booklet included two other tales, “Griselda” and “Ridiculous Wishes,” and a very interesting preface. The present study is limited to the tale as it was written down and published in Perrault’s text, with a prologue and a moral that extracts the lessons of the tale for the reader’s benefit. In this sense, what follows is not a comparative study, but simply a re-reading of a text. This discus-
sion will also be limited to those aspects of the earlier study that seem to me to have some bearing on the issue of orality. The reasons for this are both external and internal to the tale.

First, it should be pointed out that the name of the tale already figures in other literary texts written and published before 1694. Scarron mentions it in *Le Virgile travesti* and the *Roman comique*, Molière refers to it in *Le Malade imaginaire*, and La Fontaine writes in "The Power of Fables":

> Were I, as I draw this moral,  
> To be told the story of "Donkey-Skin"  
> I would experience a great pleasure.  
> It is said that the world is old, yet I still believe  
> That it should be amused just like a child.

This citation introduces the most crucial part of my thesis. I have shown elsewhere that it is not a coincidence that La Fontaine chose to cite this particular tale at the end of a fable dedicated to the power of fables and tales in general. Although the storehouse of potential tales available for citation was immense, La Fontaine settled on "Donkey-Skin."

Perrault repeatedly states, in his preface, that "Donkey-Skin" is an oral tale "told every day to Children by their Governesses and Grandmothers." There is further evidence for this point in other passages as well. At the end of the preface, "the witty young Lady," whom Perrault presents as the privileged reader of his tale, writes the following:

> The Tale of Donkey-Skin is here told  
> With such simplicity  
> That I derived no less pleasure from it  
> Than when, around the fire, my Nurse or my Governess  
> Would enchant my mind by telling it.

In the poem's last verse, which was cited above and makes up the moral of the tale, Perrault explicitly attributes the telling and reciting of the tale to certain persons occupying a very particular position within the seventeenth-century French family: to a young child's mother and, more frequently, his or her grandmother, governess, nurse, or godmother. The child to whom the story was told would typically be so young that it would not yet possess the right to speak or write.

It is even more noteworthy that Perrault and others should have implicitly underscored the fact that "Donkey-Skin" is not
just one tale among others, but rather the very paradigm of the oral and popular tale in general. In those days, people spoke of “Donkey-Skin tales” or “Donkey-Hide tales” in the same way that we speak now, as they did then, of fairy tales. “Donkey-Skin” is a strange tale indeed, one that we are told is “hard to believe.” As a kind of master tale, “Donkey-Skin” stands for the genre of oral tales as a whole, for we note that the title of this tale is employed as a generic term.

A fourth reason for focusing exclusively on “Donkey-Skin” has to do with the importance that I attach to the care with which Perrault seeks to justify the writing of this tale. In the preface to the little book of three tales, as well as in the preface to “Donkey-Skin,” Perrault tries to legitimate the writing down of oral tales in general, by way of reference to the particular case of “Donkey-Skin” (it should be noted that our author does not speak of the other two tales in these terms). Perrault’s justifications invoke and square off against the norms and values pertaining to the learned literature of the age of Louis XIV. He emphasizes the educational value that arises from the pleasure such a tale can elicit. He insists on the universal and national value of the tale, in comparison to the then-prevalent norm of imitating ancient Greek and Latin texts. The controversy between the Ancients and the Moderns, which Perrault will help instigate at the end of the seventeenth century, is not far off. In 1694 there is already polemicizing along these lines: “Some persons who purport to be serious and who have enough intelligence to understand that these tales were designed for pleasure and do not treat of very important matters, look on them with contempt.” This is not, however, the reaction of persons with good taste, for the latter were quick to point out that “these trifles were not as trifling as they might seem.”

They contained within them a useful moral, wrapped in a playful story which had been chosen to help it enter the mind all the more pleasantly, and in a manner conducive to the instruction and pleasure of all aspects of the person. . . . Yet since I am contending with people who will not be satisfied by reasons, and who are swayed only by authority and by example, I intend to accommodate them on that score. The Milesian fables, so famous among the Greeks, were no different in kind from the Fables in this collection. . . . Since I have before me such beautiful models from a wise and learned Antiquity, I do not believe that anybody has the right to level any reproach at me. I would even contend that my fables are more worthy of being told than are most of the ancient ancestors invented for the.

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than are most of the ancient Tales... All that can be said is that most of the ancient fables in our possession were designed exclusively to please, irrespective of good morals, which were much neglected by the Ancients. The same is not true of the tales which our ancestors invented for their Children...

The historical and social conditions that governed learned literary writing when Perrault wrote “Donkey-Skin”—a tale that is a paradigm of “popular” storytelling—was extensively regulated by constraints, rules, norms, and values. Perrault had a lengthy career as a man of power. From 1663 on, he was secretary to the “little Academy” and advisor to Colbert, the superintendent of the King’s Buildings. For almost twenty years, Perrault was an administrator with political power in all areas of culture. In 1683, he was excluded from the center of power and forced to write from a position of marginality. Nonetheless, he continues to refer to the inner circle in occasional works (he dedicates an ode to the Dauphin on the fall of Philisburg in 1688, another to the king on the fall of Mons in 1691, and another to the king in 1693). At the same time his writings concern the limits of political power and the dominant culture.

The writing of an oral tale thus serves the dual function of reproducing the writing of political power as well as its limits. In writing down such a tale, the author (that is, the one who writes down the tale) takes the role and occupies the place that the tale traditionally (institutionally) reserves for a grandmother or nurse. At the same time, the author occupies the position of the father in relation to the child (the reader). In this way, the author becomes the transcendental instance of authority within the familial sphere.

Yet in the same gesture the author also substitutes for the King, who is a kind of originary author of all written cultural production. The author replaces the royal principle and provides a different principle of written textual production, since he is only transcribing oral tales that grandmothers and nurses have always already recounted “by the fireside.” As “father,” Perrault writes what grandmothers, governesses, and nurses have always already said to a child around the hearth in a maternal sphere. Yet as “substitute king,” he rewrites or repeats in written form the oral stories told within this sphere, that which the maternal voice has told since time immemorial. This dual substitution establishes “Donkey-Skin” as a master or paradigmatic tale, because it tells the story of a King who is also a Father. It is a story about a Royal
Father's entanglements with his daughter, with his wife, who is the mother of his child, and with the child's godmother.

A twofold tension emerges. There is tension between the Father who is an author, and the maternal and oral narrative instance. There is also the tension between the absolute King, the originary author of all writing, and the substitute king who rewrites what the maternal voice already has always said. This dual tension manifests itself in the preface to the book of three tales in two cases where "Donkey-Skin" occupies a central place in the discussion.

In the first instance, Perrault emphasizes that the oral tale embodies an educational strategy vis-à-vis the child to be educated. The tale deploys a strategy of power pertaining to social morality and brings it to bear on "infantile" minds and imaginations: "Is it not praiseworthy that Fathers and Mothers, when their Children are still incapable of savoring the pure and unseasoned truth, make them swallow and even love this truth, by wrapping it up in pleasurable stories that suit their age. These stories are like seeds that one sows. At first, they only give rise to movements of joy and sadness, but they never fail in the end to blossom into good inclinations." Here, the metaphorical vocabulary serves as a cover for a discourse of power. The vocabulary concerns food and growth, but we clearly note the symbolic import of these words with respect to questions concerning orality and writing. These terms belong to a discourse of power and are typical of power as such. Moreover, the pleasure afforded by the tale is nothing other than an erotic trap laid by power, with the authority of the law, aimed at subjugating the tale's listeners, that is, of making them believe what they hear.

Then in the second instance, when he should be concluding his preface, and almost as a sign of the effectiveness of this strategy of power, Perrault hands over his writer's pen to a "young lady" who "writes a madrigal beneath the Tale that I had sent her about Donkey-Skin":

The Tale of Donkey-Skin is here told with such simplicity That I derived no less pleasure from it Than when, around the fire, my Nurse or my Governess Would enchant my mind by telling it. Here and there one senses the traces of Satire, But they are without spleen or malice. For everyone alike it is a pleasure to read:

What also pleases me above all Is that it entertains and Without anything to which Could possibly take exception

A twofold limit is inscribed in the tale and the preface to the writing. One limit pertains to the turned father, because a father, without knowing it, demonstrates also the limits of paternal, since the perpetrator, exception to something that compromises their doubts.

The writing down of the proposition occupied by the writing for the nurses and the opposite, however, is also was subversive in the oral re-inscribed in the written.

The hypothesis that the tale and the preface to the writing of orality and writing. The first domain is the utterances—with the intonation. In actual speech, we articulate to the voice, expression, a kind of contmulated and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to expression, a kind of contemplation and brought to
What also pleases me about its innocent sweetness, 
is that it entertains and gives rise to laughter. 
Without anything to which Father, Husband, or Confessor 
Could possibly take exception.

A twofold limit is inscribed within the dual margin of the written tale and the preface to the book, where Perrault justifies his writing. One limit pertains to the position of the writing author turned father, because a young girl writes in his stead and, without knowing it, demonstrates the efficacy or power of writing. We also witness the limits of different types of power, of power in general, since the perpetrators of power sense that they should take exception to something in "Donkey-Skin" but cannot pinpoint what compromises their power.

The writing down of the oral tale "Donkey-Skin" indicates the position occupied by the writing author, as the father substituting for the nurses and the maternal voice that tells the tale. The opposite, however, is also true. By virtue of the tale's orality, what was subversive in the oral tale with respect to power in general, is re-inscribed in the written text.

The hypothesis that will orient my re-reading of "Donkey-Skin" is as follows: Perrault's writing of a tale, "Donkey-Skin," which is paradigmatic of oral narrativity, amounts to a narrative staging of characters belonging to the realm of fiction. Through these characters, Perrault dramatizes what was potentially at stake in a writing of orality and in the orality of writing at a specific historical conjuncture, that is, at a given moment, during a certain century, and in a particular place. Nonetheless, before I undertake to demonstrate this hypothesis in a detailed re-reading of the written text of the tale, I need to formulate some general propositions on orality and on the relation of writing to orality.

The term "orality" operates in two semantic domains that share a common boundary constituted by a particular part of the body. The first domain is that of actual speech, of linguistic utterances—with the individual particularities of their occurrence. In actual speech, words function as phonic signs that give articulation to the voice, which itself is the resonant matter of expression, a kind of continuum that can be carved up and articulated and brought to exhibit all of its salient qualities, such as pitch, timbre, intensity, intonation, and so on. To speak of orality in this domain is to speak of the voice as it occurs in the words that make up speech. Now the voice is "a thing of the mouth,"
that is, a part of the body which consists of lips, teeth, a tongue, a palate, a glottis, and a throat. The mouth constitutes the site where a potentially articulate voice is made to produce or effect words. The mouth and its various parts may thus be said to designate metonymically the specificity of a speaking voice, ranging between the scream on the one hand, a discharge of almost raw sound, meaningful in spite of its near inarticulateness, and, on the other hand, an almost inarticulate whisper verging on silence. Thus it is possible to speak “between one's teeth,” “in a forced manner,” “through one's nose,” or “from the depths of the throat,” and so on.

The mouth is also an ambivalent part of the body, since it is the site of eating and drinking, the place where lips, teeth, tongue, palate, and throat engage in their specific labor of biting, savoring, triturating, masticating, and swallowing. At this point we enter the second sphere of orality where the term designates everything that bears any relation to the ingestion of food, the need for food and drink, or the instinct for self-preservation. In the original scenario of the drama of need and satiation, the child plays the leading role, since the child does not speak, but only sucks the maternal breast in order to drink its nourishing milk. The second sphere of orality exists from the moment that the first cry of want and hunger is released. It exists in the smacking sounds accompanying manducation, in the satisfied belch of sleepy satiety, and, at the other end of the cycle, in the excretion of the waste products resulting from the nutritious meal.

The language and social ritual, the ambivalent locus of the mouth joins two spheres of orality. Its ambivalence is marked by rules that articulate the difference between the two kinds of orality, as well as the danger of their possible conflation. Thus one should not speak with a full mouth, since the noisy chewing might hamper the articulation of vocal signs and the exhalation needed for vocalizing could lead to the expulsion from the mouth of bits of edible matter. Thus one ought not to speak and eat at the same time, for fear that an always possible short-circuiting might occur. For fear that the two functions, both of which take place between the lips and the throat, might suddenly be inverted. Speaking consists of expelling breath and giving it an articulate form as it passes through the mouth. Eating involves an inward movement, the ingestion of food, as well as a process of decomposition which is effected by grinding and chewing the edible substance in the very place where words are articulated.
Whence the specific secondary prescriptions that sometimes reinforce the law governing the basic activities of eating and speaking: to be properly heard, a voice must be carefully articulated in the words that it expresses; to be properly nourished, it is necessary to chew one's food meticulously before swallowing it. The inchoate words of a person who does not master the art of regulating his breath signal the absence of culture. Similarly, to swallow food without savoring and chewing it is to mark oneself as a barbarous glutton. Yet a banquet or meal can be, and is frequently, a special place and time for the exchange of words, for edifying or informative stories and discourses. Thus it is possible to speak metonymically about what is being eaten, while alternating between speaking and eating. Speaking metaphorically, one could say that, at a certain moment, what is being said will come to be eaten, an attentive ear will lap up the words of one of the other table companions or, wholly fascinated, will devour what is being recounted. According to Perrault, the children listening to a tale devour the pure truths of a morality that has been wrapped in pleasurable stories appropriate to their young age. We are reminded of the story which Aesop, the Master of Tales, acted out. This story was nothing more than a meal of language-like food twice repeated, to the point of nausea for Agathopus and the other guests. Aesop's enactment proved language and speech to be at once the best and worst of things.

Ambivalent, though privileged, as a site of speech and manducation, the mouth is also ambivalent in a second sense, which is closely linked to the first. The mouth is the locus of need, as well as the means by which this need is satisfied. As a result, the mouth is the place where a drive is inscribed. Through the need that finds an oral satisfaction, this drive comes to be anaclitically related to an erogenous, pleasure-giving zone where desire seeks its realization. Orality designates this anaclitic relation, which is nothing more than an inscription, the marking of an already marked trace, a bodily writing that inscribes itself as bodily desire within bodily need. Consequently, linguistic orality is the repetition, through the voice's symbolic articulation in the words of speech, of this relationship between an erotic drive and an instinct for self-preservation. It repeats the process by which a drive is inscribed as a re-marking of need in the body and mouth of the child clutching and nursing at the mother's breast, where he or she satisfies a need to eat, as well as realizing his or her desire.
Is the voice that is heard through speech the repetition of an archaic bodily inscription or writing? Does writing repeat an anterior voice when it inscribes itself upon a subjective medium? We have seen that orality is a matter of some ambivalence, stemming from the very nature of its locus. Moreover, the place in question cannot be properly accounted for in terms of a thing and should be thought of as a relational space—the mouth and the breast, which are alternately conjoined and disjoined. The ambivalence characterizing orality introduces us to the structure that governs articulation, as well as to its signs and marks. Is it not clear that this structure resolves the opposition between the oral and the written, between the vocal and the inscribed? It reveals a voice that is already a form of inscription, the re-marking of a trace with no origin. The structure shows this inscription to be constitutive of the body in its capacity as a desiring body. It also discloses a voice or phonic continuum that has already been dissected, cut apart, and re-marked by the law of the code. Has this voice, dual in its conjunction of infant and mother, not already been re-inscribed with the trace of their separation? Is it not clear that this is what “Donkey-Skin” is all about? The tale never ceases to talk about the disappearance of the opposition between the oral and the written, a displacement said to occur at the level of the structure and effect of signs.

Let me, then, restate the hypothesis that has been guiding my rereading of “Donkey-Skin”: As a paradigmatic tale of narrative orality, this unique tale, written by Perrault, is the narrative representation of the structure of signification in general. It also represents the anachistic relation between this structure and the need that has been re-marked in the form of desire and pleasure. Thus the anachistic nature of the symbolic structure is represented by a metaphorical and narrative staging of what this symbolic structure relies on, of what it inscribes itself upon, and of what it re-marks as the trace of an origin, a trace that only appears to be original in the context of this very repetition. “Donkey-Skin,” a written and re-written oral tale is thus the narrative and fictive, that is, imaginary, representation of a symbolic regression to the ‘origin.’