Folklore and Physiology: The Vitality of Blood in the Works of the Brothers Grimm

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Abstract: This essay explores discursive affinities between the Grimms’ assessment of folk beliefs concerning the vitality of blood and the physiological notions of vitality espoused by their contemporaries. The concept of organic assimilation (Verähnlichung) not only shapes the Grimms’ analyses of the body’s ingestion of substances such as blood in folklore and medieval literature, but also yields insights into their desire as editors to gently nurture and rejuvenate folk texts by carefully supplementing appropriate wordings or by intermixing tale variants into an organic whole. These affinities are particularly striking in light of Wilhelm Grimm’s medical treatment in Halle by the famed Romantic physiologist Johann Christian Reil. Reil’s Romantic notion that healing the body entailed bringing it back into equilibrium with internal and external forces is analogous to the Grimms’ vitalistic conception of their editorial project.

In Von der Lebenskraft (On the Vital Force, 1795), Johann Christian Reil describes the body’s ability to incorporate foreign substances into itself as a manifestation of Lebenskraft.1 The substances the body absorbs through the mouth, lungs, skin, and intestinal tract and then uses to build and repair itself are many, and include “unbekannte Stoffe aus der Luft, das Blut der Mutter, die Muttermilch, die Arzneien und die Nahrungsmittel” (unknown substances from the air, the blood of the mother, the mother’s milk, medications, and nourishment).2 Because of the existing or potential similarity of these substances to the body’s components, Reil postulates, the body can use the absorbed substances either to increase its mass or to alter “die Mischung der Materie” (the mixture of its material), explaining:

Der tierische Körper nimmt Stoffe von außen auf, die entweder seinen Teilen schon ähnliche sind, oder die er ihnen erst verähnlicht. Diese Stoffe werden von seinen Teilen angezogen, und bei der Anziehung wird ihnen zugleich eine zweckmäßige Bildung und Form mitgeteilt. Der tierische Körper macht also fremde Stoffe sich zu eigen.3

(The animal body incorporates external substances which are either already similar to its own components or which the body first makes similar. The body’s

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1 Setting forth his conception of Lebenskraft, Reil writes: “Ich habe die Kraft der Materie, die das Pflanzen- und Tierreich charakterisiert, Lebenskraft genannt, und das Wort Leben im weitläufigsten Verstande genommen” (I call the force of the material that characterizes the botanical and animal realms Lebenskraft [vital force], and understand the word ‘life’ in the broadest sense). See Johann Christian Reil, Von der Lebenskraft, ed. by Karl Sudhoff (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1910), p.25. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2 Reil, Von der Lebenskraft, p.36.
3 Reil, Von der Lebenskraft, pp.35-36.
components attract these substances and in this attraction the substances are given an appropriate development and form. Thus the animal body makes foreign substances its own.)

Rejecting Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s categorization of the process by which the body incorporates foreign substances into itself as a formative power or drive (Bildungskraft or Bildungstrieb), Reil further argues that such terms are too narrow and misleading to describe a process that to him should be understood in the context of Lebenskraft. In keeping with the materialistic and mechanistic concept of the vital force that he sets forth in Von der Lebenskraft, he thus rejects notions that physiological processes such as digestion and reproduction are functions of anything beyond the basic chemical makeup and structure of the body. Influenced by Romanticism, however, Reil would later embrace the notion of Bildungskraft or Bildungstrieb and emphasize the organism’s striving for the ideal both in its own individual form and as part of the universal organism that is nature.4

The body’s ability to absorb substances and use these to grow and heal itself figures prominently in many European fairy tales and legends, where fascination with this ability is evident in the magical properties with which it is frequently associated. As part of what we might conceptualize as a folkloric notion of Lebenskraft or Bildungstrieb, such tales and legends frequently depict characters who are miraculously healed after ingesting another’s blood or heart, eating an herb or fruit, drinking special water, or being touched by magical dew. The potentially harmful effects of ingestion are also thematized, as when a character is sickened by the breath of a malevolent character or transformed into a non-human form after ingesting food or water. Taken together, these tales and legends offer insights into folk beliefs concerning which external substances enhance the integrity of the body and which substances imperil it – or to use Reil’s terminology, of which substances can and cannot be beneficially veräbnlicht (made similar) to and by the body.

In this essay, I examine manifestations of this folkloric conception of Veräbnlichung or assimilation, and the healing and regeneration it enables, in works edited by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. I focus on the Grimms not only because Reil himself was Wilhelm Grimm’s physician in Halle and Wilhelm frequently writes of Reil’s treatment of his heart ailment in his correspondence, but also because the Grimms’ fascination with disease and