

Oral Tradition and Folkloristics

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For a folklorist it is difficult to think about oral tradition other than through the perspectives provided by our discipline. It is oral communication that links people into those small groups who create and re-create folklore, while reading is a solitary activity. Walter Ong has shown how literacy has penetrated our oral discourses, but it is also possible to see elements of orality in written texts (1982). A folklore performance that has been transformed into an archival unit still remains a manifestation of oral tradition. The main problem in reading these texts lies in our ability to discern them as a part of the tradition, which remains invisible. Oral tradition always implies going beyond the borders of individual creation and single performances; it means relying upon the words that have already been spoken and on a dialogical relationship, as noted by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986). Our object of research is not the text as a singular unit but its relationships with the rich phenomena beyond its written form, such as the generic, situational, cultural, and performative contexts. If we are able to perceive and study these contexts, we can also comprehend the textual meanings that are not explicit at first glance. Text is a gateway into these realms, ruled by tradition.

There are certain key concepts in folkloristics that mark it as a distinctive, autonomous scholarly discourse, such as “tradition,” “group,” “variant,” “type,” and so on. I find it better not to fossilize them in international folkloristics as technical terms but to reconsider them time and again, that is, to maintain the discussion rather than establish normative definitions. One of the last great projects of the late Lauri Honko was to re-interpret the concept of “variant,” which led to shifts in theory, to “organic variation” as opposed to “phenomenological variation,” to mental text and textualization, to the corpuses of thick materials that are created through “collecting of the repertoires of one or several informants in one community” (2000:15-16). Such endeavors to revitalize traditional concepts are essential for world folkloristics.

“Genre” is another fundamental issue in folkloristics, both as a medium of oral communication and a key to understand its past and present forms. A crucial step has been made from genre as a tool of archival classification to understanding it as a form of artistic expression and of verbalization of a special worldview or a modality of verbal thinking. Just as “text” has led to discussing the matters of “textualization,” the same processual understanding leads us to see “genrification” as a certain kind of activity. There is a shift from taking “genre” as a noun towards understanding it as a verb.

Finally, I mention two more remarkable developments in folkloristics. Intertextual approaches are in full harmony with other attempts to escape the search for origins and basic structures as the building blocks of a stable but illusory knowledge in our field (Tarkka 1993). Intertextuality and the dialogical principle of Bakhtin open up undiscovered domains of meaning in oral traditions. Secondly, we need critical analyses of the history of folkloristics, such as those by Regina Bendix (1997) and Diarmuid Ó Giolláin (2000). Their works help us understand how the traditions of folkloristics have been created. Similarly to psychoanalysis, the process of deconstruction can be painful but it illuminates the past and liberates our minds in order to proceed.

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