

Continuity and Change in Folk Prose Narrative

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South Slavic culture developed a rich written literature from the very beginning of the institution of authentic Church Slavic. It is thus possible to investigate the full variety of its genres beginning with the ninth century. Both original and translated, this religious and profane literature was written not only in Church Slavic but also in the vernacular. Conditioned by different historical and cultural events, it varied regionally and chronologically, flourished and then declined, and evolved along very specific lines primarily because of the influence of oral literature. In short, oral verbal art was very often a link between periods and territories that preserved the continuity of South Slavic written literature and was sometimes the only means of artistic communication.

It is, therefore, neither peculiar nor accidental that South Slavs should have an extraordinarily rich oral verbal art. Such oral literature continuously survived over the centuries in more or less “standardized form.” It is, indeed, mainly due to that form that it did survive, developing numerous patterns from a dynamic stock of formulas to stylistic conventions and a system of genres. Although in theoretical approaches to oral literature and discussions about its formulaic character, the very existence of genre was denied or, at least, called into question,¹ investigation of older sources of Serbo-Croatian material demonstrates clearly the presence of generic categories.

The present article deals with both older sources and new field recordings of Serbo-Croatian material, the latter made in the Morava River basin around Leskovac, Serbia, in 1953-71 (Milošević-Đorđević 1988). The older material serves only as a basis for comparison. An extract was made of it so that it could be considered as a kind of “ideal type,” or genre model, for each narrative category. The categories (animal tales, fables, magic tales, romantic tales, legendary/religious tales, jokes, anecdotes, and

¹ For an analytic survey of different approaches, see Ben-Amos 1976:esp. ix-xlv; and for folklore as communication, see Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975 and Bošković-Stulli 1981.

legends),² however, were corroborated on the basis of tales collected in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and have not been merely assumed a priori.

The data used for comparison are 1) materials in Serbo-Croatian recorded at random during a long period of time (from the twelfth century);³ 2) materials in the archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, namely, manuscripts of tales and legends from the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century collected systematically. Among them, the most important place belongs to the manuscripts that Vuk Karadžić used for his dictionary and his famous collections in 1821 and 1853 (Karadžić mss.:No. 8552); and to the manuscripts (Etnografska Zbirka [Ethnographic Collection]) that Veselin Čajkanović used for his collection (1927). The third source consists of materials from the Institute of Folklore Research (now, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research) in Zagreb, mostly the field collection of Maja Bošković-Stulli.

Because of the opposition of the Church to folk literature, evident in its references to oral narrative forms that are either denounced or the value of which is denied, some early concrete texts have been noted. Some of them were used as illustrations of ethical norms, documentary raw material, or background for given themes and motifs in travel books, annals, and so-called belles-lettres. A large number of legends contained in the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja* from the twelfth century, Serbian hagiographical and apocryphal literature, and sermons of Franciscan and Dominican friars appear, for instance, in similar versions even in the most recent recordings. Because of those works, it is possible to arrive at a basic understanding of the continuity of oral prose tradition in Yugoslavia, and even to note the existence of an established system of oral genres, almost all of which have distinctive features.

The magic tale *Vrač (The Sorcerer)*, written down at the end of the fifteenth century in the Serbian recension of Church Slavic, serves as a good example (Trifunović 1975:63-68, No. 20). Its “deep structure,” or internal morphological characteristics, is almost identical in the manuscript tale by one of Vuk’s best storytellers, Grujo Mehandžić (Karadžić mss.:No. 8552/258I-1-IX), and in that of Vuk’s published edition.⁴ The variations and changes are visible at the thematic and stylistic levels (if the stylistic

² The categories of folk prose narrative are designated according to the standard typology of Aarne and Thompson 1961.

³ The main survey of these recordings is available in Bošković-Stulli 1978:68-123; see also Milošević-Đorđević 1984.

⁴ Cf. *Usud [Fate]* (Karadžić 1853:89-99).

level can be discussed in texts that are not recorded directly from the storyteller). All three of these texts follow, more or less, the concept of the ideal magic tale as described by Max Lüthi (1982). A highly developed structure and a tendency toward rich rhetorical composition are also characteristic of the tales in the nineteenth-century manuscripts used by Čajkanović for his collection.

On the other hand, the dialectal texts in the manuscripts of the Zagreb collection recorded at the same time as the material from the Morava River basin, but in a different part of the country, show less developed compositional features and some conspicuous similarities with the Leskovac collection. Although the Morava material cannot be taken as a general sample of all the material recorded in recent times throughout the Serbo-Croatian language area, it may be very useful as evidence of the process of change in oral genres.

The texts correspond generally to the types in the Aarne-Thompson catalogue (1961). Some of them, however, conform to types in the Eberhard-Borataw index (1953). The legends mostly fit the categories used in the Simonsuuri (1961) and Christiansen (1958) catalogues. Thus, organized in terms of animal tales, ordinary folk tales, . . . legends, to paraphrase Dan Ben-Amos, those groups apparently represent prose-narrative genres (1976: xvii). However, a problem arises in the very concept of genre. This raw material turned out to be very different from the so-called classical text used for comparison. The collector, Dragutin M. Đorđević, a priest from a village near Leskovac, took down more than 450 texts from dictation or by tape recorder, paying special attention to the authenticity of the performances. He classified the texts according to associations of the storyteller, that is, as a rule he followed the order in which the stories were told. The abundance of material made possible a comparison between variants of one tale told by the same storyteller on different occasions as well as between variants of the same tale told by different storytellers. The complete biographies of the more than thirty narrators reveal that they were males and females of different ages from different walks of life—peasants, workers, priests, pupils, housewives—that some of them were illiterate, and that they lived in villages and towns. But what all of them had in common was a kind of consciousness of the demands of the traditional art of storytelling. That awareness of the need of “adjustment” to a pattern and of “adjustment” in the material shaped by it made visible the evolution of genre and the general problem of the concept of genre in each concrete performance of the tale during the very process of its telling.

In the extremely close interaction with the listeners, the storyteller obviously orients him- or herself according to the “expectations” of the audience and addresses him- or herself directly to it. He/she also discusses

the wishes, actions, and words of the protagonist. For instance, in one animal tale the storyteller first imitates the bear's mumbling and then interprets for the audience the difference in meaning of each animal imitation: "You see M . . . is as if he said 'thank you,' and M . . . M . . . means 'thank you very much'" (Milošević-Đorđević 1988:No. 6). The storyteller no longer allows animals to speak as humans do in the older versions, but relies instead on the "realistic" orientation of the public. Sometimes the narrator apologizes if the attitudes of the protagonists do not concur with the listeners' supposed view of the world, explaining that it is his/her duty to follow the demands of the genre. When, for example, in different types of magic tales, the false protagonist assumes the role of the main one and none of the participants in the action of the tale perceive the substitution—which is, of course, one of the "rules" of the magic tale—the storyteller provides a commentary: "I really don't know why they were so foolish so as not to see the difference between the heroines, or something else, but anyway, I have to tell it to you this way since that's the way the story goes!" (No. 59). In addition, the storyteller and the audience comment on the subject matter and connect it with their own or someone else's experiences. Relating the Cinderella story, the female narrator comments on the father's behavior after the transformation of his wife into a cow: "The father, like all fathers, loves children only when the children's mother is alive; since the mother is no longer around, the father does not take care of the children" (No. 61).

Mediating between the primary life reality of the first order and the reality of the second order, the storyteller has in mind a kind of current form, a well-known pattern to which the raw material is supposed to be able to adapt itself. But what is of interest here is that some kind of constant pressure of new ideas, a different world view, or modified sensibility becomes so strong that the storyteller (and some of the listeners) find a need to defend the "rules" of the genre. That pressure is neither instantaneous nor accidental, but represents a long-term process brought about by changes in historical and social consciousness. Observation of the concrete milieu offers the possibility of investigation of a new modeling system of verbal genres in performance, or, in other words, favors research on an old modeling system that is now dying out.

The tales from the Morava River basin show three essential tendencies: 1) conciseness even in those tales which, according to adopted criteria, are complex (magic, romantic, and religious/legendary tales);⁵ 2) realism: a change in the fictitious and fantastic in general; and 3) a psychological orientation in which the philosophical point of view remains

⁵ By "adopted criteria" I refer principally to the common traits discussed by Lüthi (1982), and, to a lesser extent, to those of Propp (1968).

outside the text, rarely as an explicit explanation. All three tendencies are correlated with the verbal-artistic system in general, the formulaic character of the entire tradition, and everyday life.

The most common form of abridgment takes place at the level of rhetorical composition. Instead of the formulaic appearance of three brothers, only one participates in the story. The tale then has to follow only his actions (for instance, the search for the sister abducted by a dragon). Repetitions, parallelisms, and triplications are automatically eliminated.

Sometimes events are foreshadowed. The *vila*, or fairy, foretells the hero's future adventures and advises him how to behave toward the "helper," or "donor," in order to gain possession of the "magical agent": "You will meet a thirsty man; give him a drink and he will make you a present of his two hairs that can revive any man; take them, thank him, and go further. And then you will meet a pigeon. . . help him and he will give to you two of his feathers. . . . And then everything happened as the vila said. . . and he went further. . ." (No. 73). References or allusions to earlier events are not avoided. However, instead of narrating the events in the same manner, the retrospective narration appears as a kind of *précis* at the end, often in the form of the protagonist's monologue, a confession in which explanations about previous events are given. Thus, in one tale, the raven girl, who finally rids herself of her raven "dress," explains to her mother that only her husband "the king" could help her to regain human shape forever "by burning the feathers" because he loved her: "That is why I could not allow you to burn my dress. If you had done it, I would have died. You were childless, mother, for such a long time. . . and you wanted to have a child even if it were in the form of a raven. . ." (No. 44). In another example, the well-known tale of the serpent bridegroom, which does not have a happy ending, the bride explains the cause of her husband's death as the result of the violation of a taboo: "You are guilty, mother-in-law, you did not have the right to watch us!" (No. 46). The explanations are interesting not only because of the tendency toward abridgment but also because of the evolution in cultural consciousness.

Within an entirely new artistic sensibility, relations between character types are changed. These types, who were almost never completely removed from their real surroundings, now acquire some sort of inner social life. In connection with those changes, "agents" and places, although still typical, assume quite concrete qualities. The magical rug is made of ten kilograms of wool and is bought with money received from the sale of land. The king wants to know exactly where a castle is located and tries to find it on the map. The youngest brother is afraid that the "buried treasure" he found will be confiscated by the "state authorities." Following the demands of the structure, a helpful animal, for instance,

fulfills his tasks, but ceases to be merely a helper “figure,” as illustrated in the following beautiful magic tale (No. 11). A miller succeeds in marrying the king’s daughter. But the usual happy ending is darkened by an epilogue: the helper, a fox, comes to live in the couple’s house, but is thrown out “because of his unpleasant scent” by the miller, who is now the king. Apparently troubled, the fox dies. The storyteller explains: “This happened because his kindness and helpfulness were so quickly forgotten.” She then adds: “Then the king’s daughter ordered ‘the fox to be cut into pieces—and not even to be buried.’” It is interesting to note that the storyteller was very unhappy living in the same house with her son and daughter-in-law.

The possibilities for abridgment are frequently based on the “oral knowledge” of the audience, that is, on some common, mutual oral education that the storyteller and listeners had acquired and that permits associations within a tradition. Thus, the understanding and the complete aesthetic experience of a particular tale can be achieved even beyond the text through comparison and associative additions from some other well-known variants. In this way the abridged performance can be accepted as an integrated whole. Such is the case in the animal tale about the wolf and the fox, which usually consists of two symmetrical parts (No. 2). In the first, the wolf injures the fox, and in the second, the fox takes revenge. Neither the storyteller nor the audience perceives the absence of the first part, taking the second as a logical consequence.

The fact that the audience no longer agrees with the irrationality of the magic tale as a common, widely acceptable poetic category leads to change in the entire stylization of the genre. It is often transformed into a parody, which results in laughter. A good number of comical magic tales still carefully preserve the “deep structure” of their serious prototypes. On the other hand, the humorous approach requires opposition of the rational to the irrational. It demands a realistic world view. In other words, the absurd attitude and the action and words of the hero can be made ridiculous only in comparison with the opposite actions, words, and the like, conceived as normal. Thus the way is clear for everyday reality to enter the magic tale.

One particularly interesting feature of the tales of the Morava region is a tendency to borrow their world view from other closely related folklore genres. The animal tale, for example, borrows attributes of certain animals from the semantic stock of the fable and leaves animal descriptions aside. In this way the animal tale becomes a story that can be understood at the surface and subsurface levels.

It is noteworthy that the magic tale shows affinities with the legend, especially with the demonological and etiological legend. Preternatural beings (dragons, monsters, fairies) that are only “figures,” as Lüthi calls

them, in the magic tale are real creatures in the legend. Entering the magic tale within a structural unit, they bring with them their own psychological identity. What is of special concern here is that the change in the nature of these beings automatically changes the story. The tale takes another direction and transfers itself into the field of legend. Magic word, curse, and desire no longer have a transcendental character but become effective and permanent. In the well-known story *Cinderella* (No. 60), the protagonist must, among other tasks, wash black wool until it becomes white. For this purpose, the magic help of her mother is unavailable. She cannot fulfill the task: "She cried and washed the whole day, and the wool still remained black. And then she cursed herself: 'Oh, damned life! May cruel destiny turn me into a bear so I can go into the forest.' And so it happened." The story ends with an explanation of the origin of the bear and thus turns out to be an etiological legend. With the disappearance of the second member of the pair of common "functions," the task/fulfillment of the task, the whole story turns in the direction of the legend. The second member of the pair of "functions" is replaced by the structural unit of the magical power of words.

Within a completely transformed artistic sensibility, the search for explanations in different types of magic tales opens up the possibility for the study of the introduction of existing patterns of explanations in folk beliefs and legends. The legend becomes a kind of storehouse for other genres, not only because of its own semantic-thematic repertoire but especially because of its spiritual, psychological, and cultural determinations. This does not mean, however, that legends as such cease to exist. On the contrary, they are much more persistent than other oral genres.

Explanations about the nature of things or the essence of phenomena, an unusual feature of magic, animal, and "ordinary" tales in general, now become an integral part of them and direct the telling in two ways: toward the legend and toward the short realistic story. Within a completely altered stylization in both cases, psychological aspects of the interpretation are underlined, mostly as an expression of traditional and life experience. In conjunction with this psychological tendency, the dialogue and monologue appear, both of which are predominant in all types. They reveal the characters of the personae and lend dramatic substance to the happening (as usual). In addition to its connective role, the narration assumes the function of describing psychological conditions.

The survey and analysis of folk tales and legends from the Morava River basin in the vicinity of Leskovac reveal a marked flexibility in the entire system of oral genres. This living material collected directly from storytellers on journeys, at water mills, funerals, construction sites, and workshops is an authentic and outstanding source for the study of the art of

contemporary oral prose, although the results cannot be taken as universally applicable until an investigation of the material of each Serbo-Croatian language region has been completed.

An analysis of the collection shows that the questions of existence or nonexistence of oral genres and of their stability or change can be solved only through a study of concrete material. Access to the material has to be diachronic as well as synchronic, and one needs to bear in mind that as international as the tales and legends are, they depend on the historical tradition of each national heritage (at the levels of both structure and content). In this sense Hans Robert Jauss is perfectly correct in stating that “the theory of literary genres cannot remain within the structures of self-enclosed histories of genres, but rather must also consider the possibility of a historical systematics” (1982:95).

Indeed, continuity and change in genres are not peculiar to folk prose narratives, but in oral literature the entire “principle of *informing* and structuring” — in Claudio Guillén’s terms—is more “visible” (1971: 110, emphasis in original). The new poetic “system” of genres that corresponds to the aesthetic, verbal, and semantic standards of a given period constantly orients itself according to old models but, on the other hand, also diverges from them. The boundaries of different genres overlap only to the extent that there is a common ground for such interaction at the level of structure or content.

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