

Inna Golovakha

THE DESTINY OF THE TRADITIONAL NARRATION. PERFORMER AND AUDIENCE IN THE ERA OF THE SOCIAL NETWORKS DEVELOPMENT

This article is an attempt to show how social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others began the irreversible changes in the ancient tradition of the narration and might become the turning point in the formation of the new type of audience, characterized mainly by very limited abilities to comprehend, transmit and preserve a lengthy narration. The switch from the narration to a tweet, the popularity of the *repost* function and the communities of the *Facebook friends* slowly lead to the disruption of the traditional narrator-listener relations, to mutation of the communicative artistic event, and to the formation of the audience/narrator relations based on the impulsion more than on the tradition.

Keywords: Narration, Narrator, Audience, Communicative Event, Facebook, Tweeter, Social Networks.

Over the centuries in any traditional community an individual, who was familiar with traditions, and who could actively participate in a communicative event, was considered the most respectful member of the group to whom newcomers would be referred for receiving information about community's oral history, rituals and folk knowledge. Every community or a small group always had commonly acknowledged performers (narrators). The more detail and context oriented the performer was, the more involved became their audience and the more respect that had for him. For instance, in one of our field trips we were sent to the fairy tales teller M. Trush (village Ploske, Ghernihivskyj region) by his neighbors with the following words: «He can tell the story for hours if you catch him in the right time, come when he is working the night shift and bring horilka with you». His grandchildren told us, that he can tell a story for 3 nights in a row and they pointed out that he is shortening the story for us, thinking that we (as adults) have no interest to fairy tales. The respect for the narration, interest in details, and active interaction with listeners were keystones for communicative events within the community. Performers were oriented toward the certain type of the audience and would not *repost* the same story under different performing circumstances. For instance, we had men refusing to tell us anecdotes because we were women-collectors and the anecdotes had obscene words. As we mentioned before, M. Trush thought that his plots are for children and *adjusted* them for an adult audience. The performers of the demonological legends would be much more enthusiastic during the performing event when they could refer to their listeners for confirming contextual details (for instance, if their neighbors could *verify* the existence of the certain person or verify the actual events behind the story). The ballad singers also would perform much more actively if they were singing in a group. Such support and bond between all the participants was a ground base for the plot development, preservation and transmission of the narration.

Mutual respect between the narrator and his audience always existed within the traditional community. Audience expected the story to be as long and engaging as possible, and performer gave his listeners the benefit of doubt that they can listen, comprehend and enrich any of his stories. It helped to form audience capable of listening a lengthy narration and to participate in a communicative event. We are talking not only about traditional village communities, but about any small group. Let's recall for instance *children's scary stories* of the mid-end of the 20th century told in summer camps, or urban legends which were famous in all the countries throughout the 20th century, the same can be said about city romance songs of the early 20th century. In a big picture society expected an individual to be a patient listener.

Through the centuries no technology or innovations ruined the narrative tradition. Printed materials, radio, TV and Internet texts were naturally incorporated by the communities into oral tradition. If anything Internet sources enriched not only the narratives but also increased the modes of communication. Such genres as rumors, conspiracies, anecdotes found a new mode of transmission as internet became more accessible. In some countries officials incorporate traditional beliefs into media sources to reach out to the population. For instance in Ghana government tries to prevent witch hunting through the posts in the papers: «She is a human even if she is a witch», warning citizens against harming witches. Papers, Internet and TV were used as an advertisement sources to popularize traditional knowledge. Alan Dundes has pointed out, the wide spread of literary sources, far from harming folklore, has a beneficial impact because it speeds up the process of oral transmission and widens the objects of folk narration [3, p. 17]. In Ukraine various sorcerers, white witches, fortune tellers, folk healers actively use newspapers, TV and Internet sites to advertise their *business*. Even today among the most educated and technically minded Ukrainian urbanites, ancient beliefs in witchcraft, house demons, dead souls, sorceresses, and their influence on human life, is unbelievably strong. We often use superstitions and demonological beliefs as a guide for everyday behavior in life-altering situations. An example of this is the highly popular *death / funeral related* rituals and superstitions in contemporary Ukraine. Death, which leads to the unknown, is surrounded by ancient folk rites and rituals even in modern society. Some of these traditions are unique, while others are amazingly similar across many cultures. Modern Ukrainians preserve the *connection* between the world of the living and the world of the dead through these traditions and rituals. The tradition includes, for instance, mirrors covered with cloth, placing money and written messages as funeral goods in the coffin, and extra plates and glasses at the table for the dead soul, also eating at (and leaving food by) the grave. This tradition as a matter of fact is widely spread in many cultures around the world including latin American and African countries. Many of the plots we recorded during the field work were about a dead relative or neighbor appearing in a dream to request a favor. The most interesting texts we collected in Ploske are stories about a dead mother's return. This plot is well known in Slavic demonology, and was recorded by many nineteenth-century Ukrainian folklorists, despite their prevailing distaste for demonological materials. The following texts were recalled by the informants during conversations about folk demonology. They deserve special attention because they have a university education and enthusiastically performed the traditional plot as an event from real life. The first text was told by Olga Yarosh, a high school teacher, in May 2002:

«One girl told me a long time ago (she is not from our village), that after her mother died (she was twelve at the time) she kept coming back every night at twelve. She was coming and coming night after night. It got to the point where she said, "I am afraid." So, an old woman told her: take an old cloth (when it turns twelve), take water and an old cloth and wash the floor (not from the door into the house but from the center of the house toward the door). You have to begin to wash the floor as the mother comes. Wash it backwards. The girl did it. And the mother said: "That's it. I will not come any more." And she never came again. That is the story» [1, p. 248–249].

The next narrative was given by Valentina Yerko, another school teacher, in the summer or 1994:

«One girl's mother died. She died and the girl was left all alone. She was very sad, almost sick, and all the time was crying after her mother. All the old women kept telling her that mother feels bad: don't cry, because something bad will happen to you. But she was crying. And one day her mother came to her. The girl was very pleased to see her mother. She was not afraid of the dead mother, she was talking to her, told her about her problems, happy days. But then ... the girl began wasting away. She was getting pale in her face, got ill a lot, nervous; but the mother kept coming. And then she told – I do not remember to whom – but she told them. They said, "It is not the mother coming to you, it is a devil come looking like your mother. You should not talk to her. Because the dead should be dead, lie in their place and

not come to the living. She is going to suck the life out of you". "What should I do?" the girl asked. She was frightened. "I know," someone said, "when the time comes and your mother appears, you have to wash the floor. You have to start at the moment when she appears. Wash from the door to the table." The daughter did it. As the right time came, she began to wash the floor. The mother appeared, just stopped at the door and asked with horror: "What are you doing?" The daughter said: "I am washing the floor". "But it means you are washing my steps away". And the mother disappeared, and never came back again. The girl got better. I heard this story being told» [1, p. 249–250].

Those texts were recorded from the school teachers, traditionally most educated members of the village communities. It is worth mentioning that during the 20th century communities the most respectful members of the community were those, who read a lot or had higher education, and the most respectful references were published sources (we had experiences when villagers would refer us to newspapers or Bible for better understanding of oral tradition). Tradition of narration found its way to survive and to actively function in 19th, 20th, and first decade of the 21st century. Triphon Stefanovskiys (priest of the village Ploske, the end of the 20th Century) in his book about Ploske remarked that darkness of villagers, their primitive cause-result philosophy, superstitious mentality, believes in witches and fear of superhuman forces might disappear with the literacy [2, p. 69]. But if we look at our fellow contemporary person in urban or rural communities we will see that our level of *cause-result philosophy and superstitious mentality* is as high as a century ago. Some demonological narratives allow not merely to hear the story but also to sense the presence of house demons (who have hairy hands and speak in heavy whispers), to converse with dead souls, or to touch a witch's tail. All senses are involved in the oral transmission of demonological legends. Here is a part of the text recorded from Motrya Perepechai in 1994. The performer is recalling her experience with the *domovyk*:

«I am lying down. Tyap-lyap, tyap-lyap. I am thinking, "I thought I locked the door? Maybe someone snuck in during the day and I did not notice." It touched my hand with his very hard hands and I know, I know that I have to ask him. He touched me – tsap, tsap, first one hand, then the other (when I go to bed, I put my hands in a special way, so that they would rest). His hands were hard. I got so scared that I don't remember how I asked, "Did you come with bad news?" "With bad," he answered. Two weeks later my husband left. So. You see, with bad news. And the house demon touched my hands. It's true. It was very scary» [1, p. 145].

At times it can be hard to tell: does traditional knowledge influences mass media sources, or media become one of the most influential channels for the transmission of oral tradition in modern times? The only thing we can say with the certainty, is that both the oral transmission and written sources often serving the same purpose: to prolong and intensify the life of traditional knowledge. In Ukraine by the 1970th most villagers got access to the Television, even the poorest family had a TV in their houses and it effected communicative process dramatically, but once again it enriched it not diminished. Television had a much greater influence on a spiritual life in a traditional community then published materials. For instance, when in 1994 Brazilian soap operas became popular it was impossible to get any interview with the performers until the show was over, the names of cats and cows got Latin American flavor and even harvest was neglected). We only mentioned the influence of TV to point out that for some unexplainable reason literacy was much bigger concern for folklorists than other progresses made by civilization.

Literacy and popularity of the published production and the influence it had on oral prosaic tradition was a big topic for the folklorists through out the 20th Century. Scholars always loved to talk about the death of the tradition. Actually they have been talking about it since the end of the 19th Century, which means that folklorists talked about it practically from the moment they started to do the field work. But this fear of the death of the tradition was never justifiable. Folklorists always hear a myth about old times, good performers who could sing, dance or new tales like nobody those days and they continue this myth by referring to old times ignoring the material evidence of alive tradition – their own collections of songs, rituals, legends, and tales. If we look at this problem in diachronic aspect we will see that exactly same comments

happened to be around in the middle of the 20th Century. For instance, Ukrainian folklorists who collected folktales in West European regions asked scholars to hurry up because only the older generation is familiar with the tradition of tale telling. Well respected, very productive Ukrainian folklorist of the second half of the 20th Century M. Huryak, during his deep research of the Ukrainian tales in East Slovakia mentioned that «Development in East Slovakia had a great impact on the life of a Ukrainian folk tradition in this region. We see the reduction of this tradition in every conceivable way. The intensity of fairy tales telling decreased, as well. The cause of it first of all radio and TV» [4, p. 180]. But nevertheless he found 105 narrators who knew and could perform tales. Interestingly, from his predecessor half a century before him (Pankevych) found only 24 narrators, approximately as much as V. Hnatiuk almost a century before. Mentioning this M. Gyryak announces the death of a tradition, as his own data shows that four times more narrators were found by him than his predecessors.

Thus, each new generation of folklorists gladly announces themselves the last eye witness to a life folk tradition. By no means we want to do the same. We are not talking about the death of the tradition (since our field work and observations prove that tradition itself is as alive as it was for the past 150 years). We are talking about the new type of communication, formed by various social platforms. At the moment we are witnessing the shrinkage of the Narration into a Tweet and the transformation of the communicative event into set of *posts*, *comments*, *reposts* and *likes*. Such new mode of communication creates and nourishes a new type of audience, who are eager to transmit new information by reposting it often without getting familiar with the entire text, and verification of its liability. Social platforms are also responsible for forming a new type of small groups based merely on a click of the button, rather than on any common traditions. The Virtual community of a thousand friends receives a *text* and comparatively to a traditional community united by common traditions, this Virtual community will most likely ignore this text, or some members will repost or like it without engaging into communicative event. Such communities also *responsible* for the creation and an active use of *shrunk* language: the abbreviations are used to express emotions or thoughts or to deliver a speedy reply: LOL, WTF, BTW, etc. The details and context are of no interest to the majority of the group since they share no common traditions. Nowadays social networks made it possible for all the participants to strive the shortest possible form of the communication (preferably a picture or 30 seconds video, followed by *likes* and *reposts*). Such short *texts* are posted for an entire community of *friends* which might include parents, teachers, colloquies, and even complete strangers without adjusting it or posting it only for an adequate audience. Even *professional* groups created in order to narrow down the circle of the receivers into a small group of insiders can be very shallow in their choice of the posted materials and characterized by low quality of the discussion.

Considering the average age of the active users of the social platforms (13–26 y. o) we can assume that they might not mature into patient audience. Even today the attention deficit is observed by the teachers, professors and journalists. The absence of the audience for a lengthy narration will eventually lead to inability to create or retell a full text and the only places which will preserve tradition of narration will be the most technologically isolated traditional communities.

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