



Narrating, Doing, Experiencing

Nordic Folkloristic Perspectives

Edited by

Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Barbro Klein & Ulf Palmenfelt

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Introduction

Telling, Doing, Experiencing

Folkloristic Perspectives on Narrative Analysis

Narrating and narratives are at the heart of the study of folklore. Whether spoken or sung, whether in the form of myths, *märchen*, ballads, epics, legends, anecdotes, *cante-fables*, jokes or life stories, whether set in times and places close to the experiences of narrators and audiences or set far away in mythical or fictionalized worlds, oral storytelling – or rather written textualizations of oral telling – constitute the core of the field.¹

However, during the last few decades something has happened to this disciplinary core. Analyses of oral narration and orally told narratives have become important, not only within folkloristics, the study of literature, and related fields, but also within a great array of other contexts. Among the newer and older disciplines that have recently intensified their interest in oral narration are: history, sociology, including ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics including conversation analysis, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, political science, history, journalism, police science, and many others (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997). Sophisticated bodies of knowledge have been built up to which folklore scholars have made significant contributions (Hymes 1972, Bauman 1984, Briggs 1988). And if “oral” is omitted, we will find the word narrative everywhere, not only within the humanities, law, and the social sciences but also within the natural and legal sciences (Lash 1990). Indeed, academic theorizing has been analyzed in narrative perspectives (Finnegan 1998: 4–9). The so-called *narrative turn* (Bruner 1990, Aronsson 2001) has taken hold of the sciences, as scholars study, more intensively than ever, not only the way it is or was, but how people speak about or represent the way it is or was.²

Moreover, the words narrative and narrating have a central position not only in scholarship but also in a multitude of other realms of life – formal or informal; obvious examples are when we seek jobs or medical help or when we have to go to court. Actually, in our mediated world – on radio, television and the internet – people are continuously in the process of narrating and describing experiences and memories to interviewers, viewers, listeners or readers who are far away in a physical and, perhaps also, an experiential sense (Giddens 1991:27). It is also to a great extent because of the media that people are continuously exposed to a complex and contradictory web of “grand” or

“foundational” narratives concerning global and local politics, human nature, nations, the natural world, and the world beyond. These grand narratives surround us and influence us in innumerable ways just as much as we use them and reshape them in our daily existence, not least when we tell stories about our own experiences. All our lives, we are involved in intertwining these complex grand narratives with the equally complex small ones through which we communicate with one another. It is through such processes that we shape our senses of ourselves: the efforts of modern individuals to create their own “thoroughly reflected identities” are, to a great extent, narrative projects, says Anthony Giddens (1991: 215). Indeed, in the early part of the twenty-first century, the words “narratives” and “narrating” are becoming as frequently and as loosely used as “identity” and “culture”. A question posed in this anthology is, therefore, what folkloristic perspectives might mean in this situation. What might be the role of folkloristic narrative studies during the current “narrative turn” – and after it?

While this question is important to us, addressing it is not the primary aim of the articles in this anthology. Rather, what we offer is a handful of recent, or fairly recent, studies of narratives and narrating written by folklorists from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.³ Our book is the result of a series of workshops in which not only the authors but also occasional guests participated.⁴ During one of the first meetings it was unanimously decided that the planned anthology was to focus not only on “telling” or “narrating” but on narrating in relationship to “doing” and “experiencing”. All participants have made efforts to incorporate all three aspects into their analyses. Not unexpectedly, this has not been easy. We do not have the kinds of backgrounds that would enable us to penetrate the complex philosophical deliberations on the three aspects and the linkages between them. And while a great number of folklore studies in some way or another address the experiences and actions of tellers, audiences and the worlds depicted in oral story-telling, there is nevertheless little in folkloristics in the form of sustained theoretical work on the provocative three-pronged puzzle on which we are trying to focus. As will be seen, in particular the relationship between narrating and experiencing has periodically been ambivalent and even highly charged among folklore scholars.

Naturally, we often debated the concepts of narrative and narrating in our workshops. If we had not understood it earlier, we soon came to realize that the word narrative can be conceived of extremely broadly. It does not have to be limited to a specific verbal form but can be regarded as a “root metaphor” for many different aspects of human life (Mattingly 1998: 186). However, we also came to realize that most folklorists conceive of narratives in terms of stories. With one exception – Anne Leonora Blaakilde –, also the authors represented in this volume define narratives as definite speech acts. In most of the analyses and descriptions in this book, therefore, to narrate means to tell stories, i.e. to present events in a more or less temporal order, in such a way that these events are given some kind of relationship to one another; stories are regarded as entities or units that have beginnings and ends or closures (Arvidsson 1998: 61). This means that the contributors to this

anthology also recognize a number of more or less stable verbal forms that are not stories; together these might be designated as verbal art in a broader sense (Bauman 1975, 1984; see also Klein in this volume).

On the next few pages, attention will be paid separately to folkloristic narrative research in two regions of the globe which have been important to the field of folkloristics as a whole: the United States of America, on the one hand, and Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, i.e. some of the Nordic countries, on the other. The two regions are discussed in separate sections because research has developed in somewhat different directions within them. It could be said that while Nordic scholars were quite dominant in international folk narrative research during the early decades of the twentieth century, North Americans came to play a greater role from the 1960s and onwards. To be sure, North American scholarship has exerted considerable influence on the Nordic researchers represented in this volume. But, as the following survey will show, these researchers are also well entrenched in the scholarly traditions of their respective countries. Naturally, the survey does not aim to be exhaustive in any sense. Rather, the intention is to provide a background, first, to the articles published in this book and, second, to its difficult topic, i.e. the links between narrating, doing, and experiencing.

Narratives, narrating, and the study of folklore I: perspectives from the United States of America

When folklore study was emerging as a field in Europe during the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, a hierarchy of narrative genres was developed. Some genres, such as wondertales (or *Märchen*), myths, fables, ballads, *fablieaux* and saints' legends were at the center of interest while historical or supernatural legends were placed further down on the ladder. But many genres that folklorists recognize today, were not considered "real" folklore and were not recorded and investigated. "True" or "authentic" folk narratives were thought to exist as recognizable, "traditional" types that, albeit with variations, followed given templates as they were handed down "from generation to generation" or were transmitted "from mouth to ear". Even as late as the 1960s, such genres as "local histories", "personal experience narratives", and "life stories" were not generally included within the domains of folklore study. They were regarded as residual forms or helpmates which, at best, could assist in the analysis of real folklore.

Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many changes took place in the study of folklore in several parts of the world. These changes were perhaps more radical in the United States than elsewhere, where the spectrum of oral literary genres had arguably long been more inclusive than in folklore study in Europe. One of the reasons for this was that the study of Native American story-telling had been important in the United States from the very incipience of field, not least due to the efforts of Franz Boas. North American Indian stories did not easily fall within the European genre divisions and,

in spite of many attempts to make the Native American material conform to European ideals, North American folklorists were, in fact, more open to generic variations than their European colleagues. Yet, the true breakthrough for an expansion of the generic landscape came during the methodological transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of genres were recognized – genres that had previously not been “discovered”, let alone accepted into the canon of proper folklore. Among these “new” genres were “urban” or “contemporary” legends as analyzed by Alan Dundes, Jan Brunvand, Linda Dégh, and others (Hand 1971). And among them were also life histories and life stories. The rising field of oral history and a number of anthropological studies of life stories, autobiographies, and life histories contributed to the new folkloristic interest in these forms (Titon 1980).

Other “discoveries” that were to become central to folklore study were the so-called “personal experience stories”, in particular as these were conceived by Sandra Stahl (1977, 1989) who demonstrated that people employ shared or similar narrative devices and techniques, also when they relate the most personal or individual experiences. People tend to express the most personal and intimate details of their individual lives in collective or traditional forms (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). Actually, the idea of “personal experience stories” emerged in folkloristics along a number of routes, not least via German studies of “*alltägliches Erzählen*” (Bausinger 1977). Most influential of all, however, were the studies of “narratives of personal experience” that were introduced by sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) and later further elaborated by William Labov alone (1972). Labov and Waletzky found that these narratives “of personal experience” contained a recurring sequential pattern involving abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Although severely criticized (Norrby 1998: 38–41), not least for methodological reasons (Bamberg 1997) and because it did not fit narratives emerging in natural conversations (Bennett 1986), the “Labovian” schema remains influential also in contemporary folkloristics and other disciplines.

These various contributions to the study of “everyday narration” or “personal experience narratives” – Labov and Waletzky’s in particular – should be further understood in the light of other influential insights and discoveries during the late 1960s and early 1970s, insights and discoveries that eventually contributed to the shaping of the “narrative turn” in the humanities and social sciences. One of the developments was the folkloristic interest in sociolinguistic methods and the efforts to interest sociolinguists in folklore study. Dell Hymes played a crucial role in bringing the two fields closer together (Hymes 1972, Gumperz and Hymes 1972). Also involved in the developments were ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, micro-sociology of Erving Goffman’s variety, the thinking on poetic language developed in the Prague linguistic school (Garvin 1964), as well as several other schools of thought, in particular various forms of structuralism. Many of these interests and developments came together in the anthology, *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, first published in 1974, and co-edited by folklorist and semiotician Richard Bauman and anthropologist and linguist Joel Sherzer.

It was Richard Bauman who, in the mid-1970s, on the basis of Dell Hymes' thinking, was to formulate a theory of verbal art as performance (Bauman 1975, 1984, cf. Bauman 2002), which has long been regarded by many as the most sustained theoretical contribution by American folklorists to the study of narratives and narrating (Berger and Del Negro 2002). A basic idea in this contribution is that narratives and other forms of verbal art "emerge" in social interaction as aesthetically marked forms. Tellers and audiences recognize these forms as special, i.e. as "performances", thanks to cues made through tone of voice, mimicry, gestures, quotations, "disclaimers of performance" and other devices. Indeed, one of the most influential sections of Bauman's work on verbal art as performance is a list of keys by which storytellers establish narrative frames. Arguing further that performance is "*constitutive*" of verbal art, Bauman helped to publicize methods to study oral narrating as "artistic communication". Among these methods are ways to transcribe tape-recorded and video-recorded texts, to "lay them out ethnopoetically" or to "textualize" them in such a way that oral qualities can be understood also by those who read the material on the printed page (Tedlock 1972, Hymes 1981, Fine 1984, Briggs 1988). In this anthology Georg Drakos, Barbro Klein, and Ulf Palmenfelt employ varieties of such methods.

The "performance turn" in folkloristics has had many effects on the study of oral narratives, primarily among North American folklorists, but also among researchers from other disciplines and countries. Scholars have come to understand how stylistically intricate oral narration can be with its pauses, cadences, gestures, mimicry and other features which audiences often do not notice, at least not consciously (Young 2000). Scholars have also pointed out that, in many cultures, oral narrating, with its rich dialogues, is closer to drama than to prose literature (Tedlock 1972). Another insight is that frequent repetitions are not to be dismissed as poor artistry as has often been the case. Rather, repetitions can be seen as ways to control complex materials (Hymes 1981). A repetitive structure simultaneously offers restrictions and creative freedom; it aids memory at the same time as it frees fantasy and improvisation (Klein 2001).

What Bauman and other students of verbal art as performance did, was to create ways to investigate oral narrating and other forms of verbal art as social accomplishments, as *doing*, as something that people engage in actively when they interact with one another. If storytellers in the past were seen as transmitters of handed down traditions, they were now regarded as active artists with power to transform social life. If the folkloristic study of narratives in the past was based on texts collected from oral narrators and then written down, it was now a study of verbal exchanges in on-going communication. It will become evident that the contributors to this volume are indebted to this way of thinking and working. Indeed, it is possible to say that the work of Richard Bauman and others, such as Charles Briggs (1988) and Deborah Kapchan (1996), has become established as "normal science". Many young folklore scholars today cannot fathom that once, not so long ago, there was a kind of folklore study in which both narrators and their agency were made invisible.

How are experiences and stories linked to one another? How is story-telling a kind of doing? In this volume eight Nordic folklorists attempt to address these difficult questions in their examinations of orally communicated stories and other forms of verbal art in which people give life to unforgettable or unbearable memories. All the articles are based on interviews in which narrators and researchers collaborate closely and the stories tell us about birth, sickness, war, miraculous cures, the long dead, intergenerational relations and matters that are so difficult to express that they are nearly kept in silence. The articles were preceded by a series of workshops and the analyses complement one another.

This anthology ought to interest anybody who is fascinated by how we as human beings shape the worlds in which we live with the help of stories and story-telling. The book may also be used in university courses.



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