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The major role of storytelling as an activity, in the past and today too, is to reveal things and assign them a *meaning*. What we talk about is what interests us; that of which we *narrate* is distinguished from the unceasing stream of life, it becomes imprinted in words and remains present in our consciousness and in our emotions – the way the image of a picture or the tune of a song is present. This potential of the narrative to generalize and at the same time to influence in terms of objects and images determines its special significance in traditional culture.

In its “classical” form, when it developed most fully as a wholesome intangible culture, the Bulgarian folklore is characteristic for the medieval village – a relatively closed society, homogeneous and permanent in its structure, in which people know each other personally, in which communication is direct, and in which social life dominates the private one. In this society narration, most broadly understood as storytelling, is present everywhere: narratives explain the emergence and the development of the world as well as the norms that underline it and are its motive force (in etiologic, ethical and eschatological legends); narratives outline man’s life with the opportunities to govern his own fate and with the advantages and disadvantages of his character (in the fairy and the novelistic tales, in anecdotes, in animal tales); again in narratives the history of the concrete community or of separate families is described, as well as the history of familiar locations or of significant events from the past (in the historical legends about settlements, locations, heroes, etc.); through narratives the everyday life is talked about – what happened and to whom, what the events in the country are, what happens in the world. In the past, when literacy and literature were rather an exception, a considerable part of the information was received and exchanged through narratives.

What are more precisely the functions of traditional storytelling? First and foremost, it is a natural *form of communication* which does not require any special conditions to take place, which is realized in everyday language, in all places

where people meet, and by all age groups. Still, *storytelling* is not simply *talking*. It requires enough *time* to unfold; it requires an envisionable *space* for the interlocutors to hear each other; it requires a definite *attitude*, as well as a *story-teller*. When, for example, are children told tales? Even when they are young and permanently around their granny, it is not the case that any moment is appropriate for them to be told a tale. This is possible only in the breaks between household activities, when the granny is relatively free to *sit down* and concentrate on tales. It is also possible when she is doing some static routine work, for example when she is knitting, darning, etc. Most often, however, children are told tales when lulled to sleep; therefore it is in most people's memories that they used to listen to tales in the evening, after going to bed.

Of significance is also the spatial location of the people while the tale is being told – they must be near enough to be able not simply to hear but to follow the words, the intonation and the gestures, which “illustrate” the tale and are important for its perception and understanding. Essential is the attitude of the listener: if he is busy doing something else or his attention is diverted and he “does not feel like listening to tales”, not only he will not hear the narrative but he will not stay to listen as well. And it is hardly necessary here to point out specifically the role of the storyteller and his mastership – a problem profoundly discussed in the scientific literature.

Storytelling, therefore, requires a situation that can be defined as *festive*, for it is a kind of departure from everyday life; it presupposes participation and partaking, it **creates a specific community**. Even if it exists for a short time – only while the narration itself takes place – this community sojourns in the ideal relationship of shared views and notions about things and the world, a relationship of partaking in the destiny and the adventures of the hero, in his ordeals and victories, in his values and aspirations. When it is a matter of a folklore milieu, however, and especially when it is a rural one, the existence of this community is not short at all. On the contrary, it is rather stable, and it is the storytelling itself that contributes a lot for the consolidation of this stability and for achieving homogeneity of views. The stories of past events and happenings maintain and specify the community's

history and the boundaries of its presence in time and space. Stories of mythical or religious heroes confirm the existing comprehension of the world and its order, of the meaning and the symbolic participation things have in human life, of the norms that govern social relationships. Stories may also describe man's fate, his growth and development, his character and weaknesses.

Storytelling draws the listeners' attention on the meaningful themes and problems of the community; it "focuses" the views of the single person and determines the way everyone perceives and experiences the world in accordance to the common norms and concepts. It establishes certain values and offers an orientation in the moral requirements, in the notions of good and evil. It is precisely for this reason that narration is also an important *form of education*. Folklore is a culture of texts and not of grammar; children are instructed in it not according to *rules*, but according to *examples*. The narrative provides for the child his lacking experience and acquaints him with the life situations to come in his future life; it introduces to him the basic dimensions of the human world, as well as the norms of behavior that he should acquire. It is rather telling that when the adults want to persuade a child to do or not to do something, they do not offer him rational arguments but tell him a story – they give him an example. Why should a spider not be killed? "Once upon a time, when the Holy Mother of God was running with the Lord away from the Jews, she hid in a cave. The spider came and wove its web at the mouth of the cave, so covered it with a web. A little later the dove came and laid an egg on the web. The Jews, when they came to the mouth of the cave, were going to enter to look into the cave, but when they saw the web and the egg in it, said: "Nobody has entered here, here is a web and a dove's egg on it, who knows when this web was made", and went away. God's mother blessed the spider to be able to weave its web within a day, to breed in the houses where people live, and also blessed the dove – to be able to lay and hatch its eggs every month" (from the region of Turnovo).

The narrative orientates the child in the world, in the order and the meaning that man gave to it, it orientates him how to act in order to live well and in agreement with himself and

with his community. But the narratives orientate not only the child – they continue to guide man practically until the end of his life. They are an *accompanying commentary* to the things that happen in reality, they give them completion and wholeness, they give them meaning in a certain direction. If a hail strikes somebody’s field – an event accidental in itself and irrelative to human existence, the narrative provides an interpretation and rationalizes it in the perspective of the traditional norms. Included in a plot, the hail turns out to be a punishment for sins committed or for not observing taboos (for example, the taboo to work on Thursdays from Easter to Ascension Day or on the feast of St. Elisey), or is an ordeal sent by God (if the person in principle observes the customary norms and is considered righteous). In support of the concrete interpretation other stories could be told about people who were punished with hail or, on the contrary, about people who withstood the ordeal without becoming angry at God, and then received an award.

In this sense, storytelling provides a *philosophical generalization* of life’s reality, offering an evaluation from the point of view of certain ideological, ethical and moral standards and norms. What is more, it aims at convincing the individual in the validity of these standards and norms, strives to present them as “natural” and even as the “only possible”. Every narrative is also an “example” – an example of the effect of certain regularities, an example of the validity of the existing life maxims, an example of what *should* and what *should not* be done. The completeness of the plot creates an impression of a completeness of the world itself, of its orderliness in harmony with man’s notions and understanding. This completeness seems to be final; it pretends to comprise all the possibilities for interpretation and perception of the world, as well as all the opportunities for action in it.

The situation of storytelling additionally insists on this seeming completeness and orderliness, providing the narrator’s and the listeners’ interpretations and conclusions, by means of which they share and specify the way they perceive the narrative. Thus in practice they share and specify the worldview, represented in the narrative, as well as the concrete way in which they experience it. Children, for example, to the very present day continue to tell each other horrible

stories about mysterious supernatural creatures that abduct children, feed on human blood, etc. The narratives are usually accompanied by commentaries on the truthfulness of the happenings, whereby some of the children support their unflinching veracity and some express doubt in their reality, thus voicing their hope that they will not meet these creatures in their lives and will not become the victim of their demonic influence. Such commentary completes the narrative itself, underlines its impact, strengthens or weakens the trust in it.

One and the same plot is narrated and is perceived differently in the different age and social groups, as well as in different epochs. The knowledge about the concrete situation of storytelling gives an idea about the variants through which the plot is spread, but also about the meanings which every particular milieu draws and fixes in it. The commentaries on and about the text, the associations it generates, the other texts to which it is linked outline the direction of its impact, draw the circle of its meanings for the given milieu. Just like in literature, the “readings” of the text supplement, specify and detail its meanings, they become part of its vitality and significance. And if in literature these “readings” cannot be observed and verified directly, in folklore the “reception” of the text is organically woven into its oral manner of existence – in its performance/listening. Precisely for this reason, the horizon of a narrative’s message reveals itself as much in its text as in the very situation of its narration.

The narrative situation offers a framework for the perception and the interpretation of the text; it sets the mode of its acquisition and interiorizing. The commentary of the storyteller and the listeners, the emotions and the reactions expressed equalize the perceptions and the experience, they consolidate the attitude towards the hero’s acts and establish certain approach to the world and to human behavior in it. Hence, storytelling is also a *process of instruction*. It guides the listeners when and how to act, it orientates them in the world’s values, it offers them a choice between the “proper” and the “wrong” step, and it offers them a choice of a role. The choice of a role, in its turn, means a choice of identification – individual and social, through which everyone joins his community and receives a place in it. Thus the narrative becomes an *example* and a *motive* for certain behavior.

Along with everything else, storytelling exercises still another important role – the *mediatory one*. Through words and narratives, as has already become clear, information and accumulated experience are shared – vertically, between the different generations, and horizontally, between people of the same age. The information exchanged is various and, I would say, *pervasive* – it penetrates all spheres of social life and all age groups. Prior to the time when the mass media, mainly the radio and the television obsessed the private space of the home and became the basic source of news, this role was played by storytelling. Through narratives and commentaries on them was communicated what happened and to whom, who acted in a particular way and – what is especially important – how things should be estimated. The narrative reveals the event in its wholeness – facts together with their evaluation.

And here quite naturally the role of the storyteller himself comes to the fore. Of course, he should be smooth-tongued; he should be able to control his audience and to provoke particular impact. But he should be much more than that – he should be the “spokesman” of tradition and of the worldview maintained by it; he should be a man of wisdom who, apart from being able to order the events in words, should be capable of estimating and interpreting them; finally, he should be a teacher and a tutor who can draw a lesson from the narrative and can relate it to life itself and to the events in his own community. It is precisely for this reason that the narrator in folklore is not simply the one who can tell stories; he is – as his fellow-villagers usually point him to us – the one who *knows*. He *knows* tales, he *knows* about the history of the village, he *knows* biblical and other religious stories, etc. “Knowledge” is the emblem which marks his presence in the community and which presupposes much more than the mere knowledge of tales: he *knows* the reference between the events and their explanation, he *knows* how one should act in certain moments, he *knows* how to verbalize the way out of desperate situations. Therefore, in his community the narrator is a spiritual leader and a mentor: he can be a historian or a philosopher, a moralizer or a psychotherapist, and in rare cases he can be all these at one and the same time.

This explains why in folklore culture the storyteller is also a universal mediator – he preserves the historical memory through the generations; he is the promoter of new knowledge acquired from books or media; he is on the borderline between different ethnic and social groups, connecting them and transferring their specific knowledge; he often patches controversies up and reconciles hostile sides. One goes to the narrator for advice or simply to hear a story. A story that can take one out of the insoluble and confusing everyday problems and that can bring his faith back that still in the world there are order and rules, that things do not happen just like that, that they are connected to human deeds and that, taken as a whole, they reveal the profound and irreversible intention of fate or, perhaps, of God. For one can accept even the most impertinent coincidence, if only he can find some regularity and meaning in it, if only he can manage to trace it ordered in a *narrative*.

Precisely this is what forms the *therapeutic role* of storytelling: including things in a plot, it dismisses their accidental and inexplicable nature; it “tames” them and introduces them in the order of the human world. Thus disasters and natural phenomena become punishments and ordeals sent by God; fortunate turns become miraculous interferences from above; personal or social failures are explained as a result of not observing the traditional norms or prescriptions; the coincidences in time or space are perceived as omens and portents, etc. Through narration the world and the events in it are connected in a plot and become understandable; certain regularity can be followed in their sequence and one can conform his deeds and intentions to it; this sequence can be “read” as fate, which can be opposed or, on the contrary, closely followed. After all, things are what they are, and people are hardly given any opportunity to change their course. But what really depends on the individual is to see a meaning in what happens and to take a particular role in it, thereby remaining in harmony at one and the same time with his character and with “God’s providence”. To put it in the words of the fairy tale, man can become the master in the kingdom of his own life, or, if we use the imagery of the epic song, he can become the hero in his own fortune. In that respect folklore narratives offer sufficient opportunities for a choice of identification.

The functions of storytelling do not end with those described above. However, what has been said so far is enough to make it clear that as an activity it is essential for the folklore culture: it forms a worldview, determines the public opinion, and regulates the relationships in the community. Practically, it “makes its way” wherever it finds a pause in the intensive agrarian work and where this pause is not occupied by the communication between the young who singing, dancing and performing ritual games get to know each other and make their choice for a family partner. As evidenced by the recorders of the practice in the past, storytelling takes place in the pub; around the fireplace in the long winter evenings; at the mill, among the temporary community of those waiting to grind their grain; among people working far from their families and trying to compensate the absence of their relatives by telling and listening to stories in the evening; on the road, where neighboring women gather to knit and discuss the news of the day. Narratives give meaning to everyday life, outline the framework of the living in a community, and offer an interpretation of the world in its wholeness.

The role of storytelling does not essentially change in our time, although its place and importance in culture and in social life is much limited. Differentiation and specialization in all spheres of human activity gradually deprive it of its existential significance and shift it to the periphery of the immediate and non-formal communication, strongly limiting its potential for development. Science takes up the function of an explanatory theory or, more precisely, explanatory theories of the world and the various phenomena in it; politics and the different social institutions control the public behavior and relationships; education becomes the main source of tuition and of acquiring knowledge; and art, literature in particular, transforms storytelling into a specialized activity which reveals and explains the human existence as a wholeness.

Still, even in the contemporary society of globalization and computers, storytelling continues to prove its vitality and significance. It persists in all temporary or more stable communities, and continues to be a means of human communication, of explication and identification, as well as of interpretation of the world’s phenomena. Narratives spring wherever a

group of people spends some time together in an immediate contact and in a limited space. This could be the socially regulated and thus obligatory school attendance, presence in the army or in some comparatively stable professional milieu; this could be the compulsion of a disease bringing one to the hospital, or the command of law that isolates violators behind the bars of a prison; it could be the narrower or wider circle of one's family and relatives; it could be the willingly chosen circle of friends; but it could also be a short-time community emerging in the course of various circumstances – waiting in a queue, in the train, on a holiday, etc. Everyone remembers and is ready to tell different stories that connect him to a particular milieu or time of his life, that build up his biography and express and legitimize his presence for other people. What is more, he not only holds these happenings in memory, he has his own interpretation for them and narrates his own version, which may not coincide with the version of the other participants. Thus he builds up his own more or less truthful image, turns into a hero of the narrative who evokes trust and causes interest, who arouses laughter and admiration or, on the contrary, bores and repulses the listeners with his unconvincingness or untruthfulness. Hence, everyone's problem is in what exactly narrative will find himself and whether the role he sees himself in will coincide with the one in which others see him.

The contemporary man, however, not only builds his biography but also indicates his identification with certain social circles and ideas through narratives. In a company of friends, among colleagues or in an accidentally gathered community, through narratives and comments on them it becomes clear how one perceives the events of the political and the social life, how he associates himself with particular social groups, what are his civic and life views. Thus narratives become markers of group belonging, markers of the "ours" against the "others".

Storytelling also preserves for a long time its explanatory role among those circles, mostly rustic ones, but also in the town, who are not well educated and specialized and who continue to interpret life phenomena through traditionally existing views and beliefs, mostly because of the lack of knowledge, but sometimes also because they prefer the comfort of the

well known fables to the detached rational logic. Moreover, storytelling is in its right place when religious views and behavior are explicated and defended. Then the stories for “actual” happenings with close relatives and friends or the “I” narratives for God’s punishment, salvation and miraculous cures acquire the power of a proof and an example.

The storytelling’s existential necessity and vitality, however, are not enough to preserve its traditional forms, which naturally die out with the dying out of the very notions and situations that gave birth to them. The disappearance of belief in the older explanations of the world and of the events in it leads to an essential transformation in the meaning and functions of legends, which are perceived more and more as fables and parables and not as trustworthy knowledge. The narration of tales, in its turn, is being displaced by the presence of television with its endless serials and films for children. Greater stability is manifested by superstition stories but with changed personages – instead of the old vampires, ghouls, hobgoblins and fairies, now in the cities they talk about serial killers, disappearing hitch-hikers, ghostly black cars, etc. A boom characterizes the historical narratives – about the town or the village, about various families, about locations and historical events, and this boom is predominantly due to the local historians who diligently trace materials about the regional history and, given the opportunity, publish them in books. Humor genres – anecdotes, parodies and funny happenings – also preserve their vitality, but in them, too, the setting is changed, old village lifestyle and values being replaced by modern understanding and way of living.

These theoretic observations are confirmed by the data reflected in the questionnaire cards on the project “*Living Human Treasures – Bulgaria. List of Activities*”. The results obtained allow offering the following general statistics:

1. Insignificant is the number of storytellers that are *under the age of 50*. Still, some people of this age are listed, which means that the tradition is transmitted. There is no doubt, however, that today people who are known in their milieu as storytellers achieve this mainly thanks to their personal qualities and gifts, and not because they are supported by the

contemporary conditions of living and by the tradition, the influence of which is becoming ever more limited and which is ever more turning into a memory.

2. There is a relative balance between the number of *women* and *men* storytellers, whereby men still predominate – for the different districts and regions the difference registered in the cards is between 10 to 30%. I think that in this respect the picture was similar in the past, too: storytelling is not an activity that can depend on gender, nor is it associated with gender differentiated practices. The impression that men narrators are more numerous is due to the fact that men, apart from telling stories in their families, narrate much more in the public space and therefore are more popular as storytellers, whereas women are known for their tales mostly in their families, among their children and grandchildren, or in the closer circle of neighbors and friends.

3. Prevailing are the storytellers with *secondary* and *primary* education. There are illiterate people only among the oldest of them, or among some of the minority groups, and people with a higher education rarely become established in their community specifically with the role of storytellers.

4. Most of the storytellers acquire the skills of narration in their *family*. Characteristic of modern times is also the mastering of skills *on work*, and this is not only with men, which was more typical in the past, but also with women. Today an important source of stories, pointed out in the questionnaire cards too, is represented by mass media and books. What is more, these bear the authority of truthful knowledge, or at least of knowledge that is official.

5. In the narrative repertoire the *historical stories* prevail – about the settlement, about definite families and locations, etc. Generally speaking, people registered in the cards as narrators-“historians” are almost twice the number of narrators of *traditional stories*. As already mentioned above, this is natural for contemporary conditions and corresponds to the desire of every community to outline and defend its identity and to preserve the memory of its genealogy and specificity.

6. In the section “others” of the repertoire column, most frequently are pointed out *anecdotes*, or more generally *humor, legends, historical facts, memories*. This emphasizes once again the observation that active and developing are those genres which have not been entirely displaced by modern specialized culture and which maintain the feeling of belonging to a group.

7. Interesting are the data about the narrative situations: the focus is shifted from the family to *storytelling on holidays/feasts*. The additions given in this column are usually *at a sedjanka* (working-bee), *in the chitalishte* (culture centre), *on a private visit, in publications, in the street*. Apparently, the presence of traditional storytelling as a socially significant activity withdrew from the sphere of the immediate and informal communication to situations having a more definite framework and a regulated form of manifestation. Here belongs the festive table of different community gatherings, the village fair, the festival of folklore art, other festivals, and the stage. Talking about the stage, it should be pointed out that it contradicts the very essence of storytelling. As already explicated above, storytelling presupposes natural communication without any strict boundaries between the narrator and the listeners who can interfere at any moment of the narration with their own reactions and comments and on whose perception to a large degree the very performance depends – its duration and the major accents in it. Therefore, the stage not only fails to contribute to the development of storytelling, as it does for example for dancing and singing, but it even excludes its more essential forms and tolerates only some shorter genres.

The results of the questionnaire cards once again stress the paradoxical nature of storytelling: as an activity it will preserve its vitality as long as there is immediate human communication, but, on the other hand, it would not be able to preserve its traditional forms, which naturally die out and lose their impact together with the life situations and the worldview that brought them about and maintained them.