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COLLECTING FOLK NARRATIVES IN NEW YORK CITY TODAY

Francesca Canadè-Sautman

The stories which follow are a wonderful example of how the collection of tales from oral tradition can be performed by lovers of folklore in a contemporary urban setting. The collector, Ms. Eulela Swinton, was not trained in folklore in the full sense of the word, except for exposure to its principles and methodologies in the curriculum of a few college courses. Her love for the discipline, however, and her sensitivity to its particular demands, enabled her to obtain stories in a natural setting, as one worker from another in the workplace, and also to be very attuned to the problems of recording and reproducing such stories faithfully. She clearly raises the problem of passage from recording (an exact copy of the tale) to transcribing (an interpretative process) which many folklorists have been accused of overlooking; as Halper and Widdowson observe (229), tape recording is only an initial step in tale collecting and does not guarantee faithful rendition:

the collector or editor has then taken the transcribed transcript and treated it as he would the rough draft of a hastily-dictated letter that needed revising and polishing. Usually the narrative has been edited according to literary conventions: the very punctuation of the tale demonstrates that it is no longer truly oral. Though the editor may retain a few hesitations and false starts to give the illusion of orality, his real goal has been to present a readable text.

There is no such failing in Eulela Swinton's collection: she strives to remain faithful to every aspect of her informant's delivery. Repetition, for instance, is a noticeable factor in these stories told without stylistic embellishments. The reader must accept the particular form of storytelling in which imperatives differ sharply from literature as such: "In folk literature there is no searching for linguistic diversity for its own sake, but instead an economical usage of the apt, the serviceable and the fitting, strictly subordi-

minated to the main aim, the telling of a story, the capturing of an emotion, or the expression of a truism" (Buchan 8).

Eulela Swinton is also in keeping with modern emphasis on the context of performance, where one "studies a series of interactions between tale-teller, audience and text, and observes how each is affected by the others" (Buchan 11). Her comments, which preface the stories, are thought-provoking insights into the complex relationship between oral and written word and are particularly suggestive in their perception of gender shifts during the performance of the tale (Omina's story).

It should not surprise us to find folk narratives gathered among hospital workers of modern New York, including versions of tales recorded at other times and under other skies. Only an outdated and naive view of folklore assumes that it is strictly reserved to the rural folk. Today, folklorists distinguish two major phases in folk literature, "non-literate" and literate, or pre-industrial and post-industrial. In this later stage, new genres, which are essential to understanding the vitality of modern folklore, have emerged, such as the modern legend, given fame by Brunvand's work. Tradition, we are reminded, does not merely decline from a past state of excellence into modern corruption; in fact, "tradition is always with us, evolving and adapting to changing circumstances" (Buchan 5). The stories gathered by Eulela Swinton are clear manifestations of this process.

Countless variants of a type are found from country to country, across the ages, and from teller to teller within one culture. This multiformity of the tale is directly linked to its internationality: the core of the story, its meaning, what Buchan calls "the platonic essence," is international, while the texts are national and regional (10). From one text to another, secondary motifs change as well as character and place and, most of all, the style and tone of performance. This constitutes the phenomenon of variability, given primary importance in a recent collection of essays edited by Veronika Gorog-Karady (1990).

Omina's story is a variant of a genre which is important in international tradition but not always fully recognized because it does not include any supernatural or marvelous elements. These could be classified as "Moralistic tales," as Hoogasian does in a full section in her collection of Armenian tales garnered in Detroit (1966; 1982). Her tale 46, "The Gold Piece," is a similar illustration

of the value of work: a father teaches his son to value work by demanding a gold piece for which he has actually toiled. An Indian folk tale from Nagaland (Beck et al. #26) tells how a grandfather teaches his grandson to rely on agriculture rather than hunting and fishing by denying him pleasant pastimes.

Jane's story belongs to a different genre, the personal narrative, the memorate concerning the supernatural. Memorates have only recently been recognized by folklorists as a rich and meaningful genre; a memorate, theoretically, refers to a narrative told about a purely personal experience, usually referring to a supernatural experience, and comes from *memorat*, a term coined by Carl W. von Sydow in 1934. However, today, scholars have extended this definition to include second, third and even fourth-hand tellings, because the passage of time makes it hard to have that direct link (Gwyndaf 219-21).

Jane's story belongs to that category. It has the very interesting characteristic of being "disowned" by the teller, who tries to distance herself from the beliefs expressed, while giving us all the details that make the story probable. This distance has been studied by folklorists (Hufford 1982), in particular with respect to how it affects the style of oral performance. For instance, contrasting the story told by a woman, Joan, who disassociates herself from belief, and Vera, who thinks aloud her personal experience, Gillian Bennet remarks that the very voice quality and intonation of both speakers is different:

Joan uses a lively, vivacious voice, a great deal of stress, varied tempo, strategic pauses, smiles and chuckles of amusement. She is providing an entertainment. Vera's voice, on the other hand, is low, her tempo slow, her intonation almost monotonous, even her bit of dialogue is hardly differentiated from the surrounding discourse. (58)

Furthermore, the very structure of the two stories will be affected, the "distanced" one being linear and chronological, the second marked by cyclical accumulation. Bennet concludes, "The neatly linear story is used only by speakers who wish to discourage discussion. The stories either embody negative precepts ("I don't believe in that because . . ." or are used to change the tone of the conversation from serious to unserious" (ibid). As we can see, Jane's story is remarkable in that she offers two variants of the events surrounding the mysterious death, all connected in the

interpretative mode, all organized chronologically according to hindsight and all interspersed with disclaimers. The final reference to "entertaining" is a "fall" back into reality after the tale has unfurled in an increasingly dramatic and convincing presentation of the supernatural which surrounds us in daily life. It seems to concord with Bennet's findings on the rapport between the teller's attitude towards the content of the tale and tone of her performance.

Both tales collected by Eulela Swinton are valuable to us as lovers of the folk tale because they are windows open onto a living tradition of oral transmission of tales, one which, with indomitable strength, continues to thrive in the noise and bustle of modern urban centers, one which maintains the lifeline between immigrants and their culture and is not erased by the overwhelming onslaught of mainstream culture in the United States today.

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