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Some problems of folk-song variability : an introductory essay

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SOME PROBLEMS OF FOLK-SONG VARIABILITY

An introductory essay

The variations of tunes and their texts are now regarded as an important element in the origin and life of folk songs. Since the end of the 1920s they have been intensively studied by European folklorists, who successively employed the methods of comparativists, social historians and structuralists. Attempts at defining variability have been modified in numerous ways. This introductory essay presents a survey of the present state of scholarship and a discussion of some problems not yet solved or analyzed.

Some ethnologists lay stress on the social background of variability, i. e. on the relationship between the collective character of folklore and the individual contribution of unknown popular authors, while others study the aesthetic quality of folk art forms, their variations and disintegration. At one stage the study of variability was attached to the idea of perfection: the variation process was believed always to produce a composition of increased aesthetic effect and more profound thought than the original form. The scholars of today for the most part concur in their views and accept the definitions of variability formulated towards the end of the 1960s. Variability is now considered to be a substantial and inseparable part of oral tradition. It manifests itself both in traditional and contemporary folklore and is affected by the environment of both the author and the recipient. The variation process is not immanent in character; it should be studied within the context of the economic and social structure and the corresponding system of concepts and beliefs. Some scholars emphasize the element of so-called affinity; in its study, however, the autonomous character of folk art development seems to be unduly accented while social influences and historical progress are neglected. Special cases of variation include the "Zersingen" (gradual disintegration of songs) and "Umsingen" (their gradual reshaping), which promote the evolution of well known and fully comprehensible compositions out of obscure and little understood texts. Another component of the variations is the process of innovation, defined both as reappearance of traditional songs and as a shift from traditional to contemporary folklore. The resulting changes in various compositions can be denoted as contaminations. Some scholars believe that popular tradition observes the law of self-correction, formulated by Anderson and Ortutay as a popular tendency towards a single basic form of the composition. It is accompanied by the "Gesetz der Umgestaltung" (law of transformation), successively studied by Aarne, Krohn and Thompson. It contains fifteen clauses listing the principles which govern the transformations and the origin of a new folk composition. Variability is thus

regarded as a revolutionary process, shaped and controlled by tradition, which in turn is fashioned by its course.

Variation gives rise to a variant, i.e. a new formation of the traditional composition and a structural element of folk art taken as a whole. Originating from dialectical tension between the individual and collective creative processes, it is a dialectical antithesis of the effort to preserve the identity of songs. The transformations of folk art, manifested in the social functions of the song or in its transference from one cycle of popular customs into another, belong to macrostructural changes, while those consisting in the alteration of the tune or the words or in passing to another genre rank among changes in the micro-structure. Not only the idea and the approach to the representation of reality in art, but also the language and the methods of composition are subject to variations. Changes take place both within and without the popular tradition. This can be demonstrated by songs reporting socially interesting events: they arise or undergo various changes through the interference of semipopular unprofessional authors or of imaginative literature. This process is continuous and takes place even now. The role and share of folklore and non-folklore traditions are influenced by the period in which the song appeared and by the environment in which the author lived. The variants, which result from improvisation, are the only form of existence of folklore compositions and disappear together with the death of their bearers (Bogatyrev). Heterogeneous variants can be grouped into versions having various geographically limited types or mutations (Sydow). The terminology is far from being fixed, and new methods are employed in defining the expressions and in measuring the quality of variations (Sokolov, Gusev, Putilov and Chistov; Bødker; Ortutay; Pentikäinen; Sirovátka; Holý). The conception of the invariant ranges from a mathematical expression to a structuralistic definition (Permyakov; Pop).

Analyses of numerous variants and versions suggest definitions of the type, archetype, oikotype, genotype and phenotype, and point to the laws governing the occurrence of hybrid types. The type is a traditional composition with independent existence (Thompson), apparently a set of variants or versions. The song model is a term almost exclusively used by structuralistic research workers, whether it denotes a model of versification, of structure, or of a whole category of compositions (Pop; Voigt). The definitions of the version, "Red-aktion", type and model are still an open problem.

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The state of flux which characterizes the usage of terms concerning variations and variants was the main reason why the members of the Department of Ethnology and Folklore Studies at J. E. Purkyně University in Brno arranged a critical discussion on ways of solving some of the outstanding problems. In the 1969—1970 session the Brno students of ethnology were enabled to take part in a seminar on the variation process in folklore, conducted by Assistant Professor PhDr. Bohuslav Beneš, CSc., Assistant Professor PhDr. Dušan Holý, CSc., and Assistant Professor PhDr. Oldřich Sirovátka, CSc., the co-editors of the present volume. Members of the Institute of Ethnography and Folkloristics of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague and of its Brno branch, lecturers of the University of Olomouc and lecturers, graduates and students

of the Philosophical Faculty in Brno contributed various papers. The seminar dealt with the life and variability of folklore, including folk songs, instrumental music, popular story-telling, and ritual folklore, supplemented by discussions on general concepts. The following papers were read:

- B. Beneš: Současný stav základní terminologie zkoumání variačního procesu (The Present State of Basic Terminology Used in the Study of the Variation Process)
- D. Holý: Úvaha nad terminologií vztahů mezi folklórními útvary (Some Thoughts on the Terminology of Affinity Between Various Types of Folklore)
- O. Sirovátka: Krajská variabilita a interetnické vztahy (Regional Variability and Interethnic Relations)
- O. Heroldová: Krajské zvláštnosti v pověrečných povídkách na moravských Kopicích (Regional Peculiarities of Wonder Tales in the Kopianice District of Moravia)
- M. Toncrová: Individuální a krajská variabilita v podání jihotěšínské písně lidové (Individual and Regional Variability in Rendering Popular Songs of the Southern Těšín District)
- E. Večerková: Typy, funkce a variabilita "vyvolávek" při jízdě králů na Uherskohradištsku (Types, Functions and Variability of Calls Used in the Whitsun "jízda králů" Festival in the Uherské Hradiště District)
- A. Sulitka: K variabilitě dramatických útvarů v oblasti Spišské Magury (On the Variability of Drama in the Region of the Spišská Magura Mountains)
- M. Šrámková: Balada o vražednici dítěte v české lidové tradici (The Ballad of a Child Murderess in Czech Popular Tradition)
- J. Gelnar and O. Sirovátka: K vymezení písňového druhu (On the Definition of the Song)
- D. Klímová: Obecná rovina variability (The General Notion of Variability)
- L. Neufeld: Variace balady "Za Turka provdaná" ve slovenské a maďarské lidové tradici (Variations of the "Married to a Turk" Ballad in Slovak and Hungarian Popular Traditions)
- L. Bartůšková: Variabilita svatebních vinšů na Uherskohradištsku (Variability of the Wedding Well-wishing Rhymes in the Uherské Hradiště District)
- K. Dvořák: Variační technika "predníků" z Hrochoti pod Pořanou (The Technique of Variations Used by the "Predniks" [First Violin Players] in the Village of Hrochoť pod Pořanou)
- J. Gelnar: Živé tradování písní v okruhu svatebních obyčejů v Suché Hoře (Circulation of Songs Attached to Various Wedding Customs in the Village of Suchá Hora)

Some of the papers were published in *Národopisné aktuality*, *Český lid*, *Národopisný věstník československý*, *Slovenský národopis* and other journals. Besides, the seminar included reports on selected Czechoslovak and other books and articles on the subject.

Most of the studies appearing in this volume are results of research employing the traditional methods of structural comparison. Other approaches are suggested in the opening study, which makes new use of quantitative methods. The editors refrained from obliterating or reconciling differences in ideas, terminology, presentation or methods, for these differences reflect the present

state of scholarship and call for confrontation. The fundamental point of view, however, is identical in all the studies included: it is the historical and materialistic approach to folklore, which in turn reflects the way of life of the people in the given period. All the articles deal with folk songs and analyse both their words and their music. Their order in the volume is based on the general principles formulated in this introductory essay. The volume opens with a study by Dušan Holý on some theoretical problems, followed by two articles on subjects bordering on folklore, literary history, unprofessional literature and song composition (Pletka; Beneš). The subsequent studies deal with the problems of variability and genre in folk songs (Širovátka) and on changes in the living traditions in an area of mixed population (Šrámková). The volume is concluded by largely descriptive studies of folk songs and their functions in popular customs (Toncrová; Gelnar).

As a collection of separate articles presenting different views, the present volume cannot offer solutions to problems which will stimulate folklore studies for many years to come. However, the editors hope that it may suggest answers to some more limited questions and instigate further work on the issues involved. In the present form it represents an independent part of research work carried out by Czechoslovak folklorists in preparation of the Seventh International Congress of Slavists, which will take place in Warsaw in 1973. Its analyses of Czech, Slovak, Silesian, Polish and German songs will contribute to the discussion in the Fourth Section (IV-2 and IV-3) of the Congress.

Bohuslav Beneš

