

# UKRAINIAN FOLK PROSE TRADITION AND ITS PERFORMERS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT (ON THE MATERIALS FROM THE VILLAGE OF PLOSKE, CHERNIHIVSKY REGION)

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## Abstract

A thorough fieldwork has been conducted by us in Ploske village (Chernihivsky region, Ukraine) over the last ten years, the first expedition having been performed in 1994. This fieldwork gave us some interesting and unexpected materials, very important for the study of the life of contemporary prose narrative tradition. Considering the fact that we had materials for comparative analysis collected in Ploske over a hundred years ago (by O. Malynka), we could see the life of folk prose in this community in its historical dynamics and compare its statuses among active and passive bearers in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The materials collected at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (we recorded over 300 prose texts, most of which are demonological legends and tales) testify that folk prose tradition in Ploske did not decrease over the century, despite the strong belief of most folklorists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that traditional folklore genres are dying and the number of knowledgeable performers is continuously decreasing.

## Resumo

Nos últimos dez anos, levámos a cabo trabalhos de campo sistemáticos na aldeia de Ploske (região de Chernihivsky, Ucrânia), tendo a primeira expedição sido feita em 1994. Nestas recolhas, obtivemos alguns materiais interessantes e inesperados, muito importantes para o estudo da vida da tradição narrativa em prosa na actualidade. Tendo em conta que, para uma análise comparativa, possuímos materiais recolhidos em Ploske há cem anos (por O. Malynka), pudemos observar a vida dos textos tradicionais em prosa nesta comunidade na sua dinâmica histórica e comparar o seu *status* em informantes activos e passivos no final do séc. XIX e no princípio do séc. XXI.

Os materiais recolhidos na passagem para o séc. XXI (gravámos mais de 300 textos em prosa, a maioria dos quais lendas demónicas e contos) mostram que, em Ploske, a tradição em prosa não diminuiu ao longo de um século, não obstante

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a crença muito enraizada da maioria dos folcloristas da segunda metade do séc. XX de que os géneros folclóricos tradicionais estão a morrer e de que o número de informantes sabedores está em contínua diminuição.

In this article we shall be looking at the functioning of oral prose in a typical Ukrainian community and its development compared to a century ago. We shall start by giving an overall view of the tendencies in the development of the Ukrainian folk tradition and describe its performers and listeners to the reader unfamiliar with Ukrainian folk tradition.

In order to fulfill our goal, we looked for a community which allied an actively functioning folk tradition to a traditional way of living as well. The community itself had to be a typical, traditional village with a history of folk research and well presented folk prose. Ploske –located in the region of Chernihivsky (Poliss'a) in northern Ukraine– is a village that has been researched in depth over the last ten years. It gave us some interesting and unexpected materials which are very important for the study of the life of contemporary prose narrative tradition.

The first expedition was performed in 1994 by O. Britsyna, A. Britsyn and I. Golovakha. This was followed by repeated expeditions in the course of the following 10 years: in 1995 (by the students of Humanities' Lyceum and Slavic University headed by O. Britsyna); in 2000-2005 (by O. Britsyna, American folklorist N. Kononenko and P. Holoway); in 2004–2005 (a few expeditions undertaken by O. Britsyna and I. Golovakha). Since we had materials for a comparative analysis collected in Ploske –carried out over a hundred years ago by Ukrainian folklorist O. Malynka (Malynka 1902)–, we could see the life of folk prose in this community in its historical dynamics and compare it's status among active and passive bearers in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. During our fieldwork we used various techniques for collecting narratives together with the context of their performance.

The interest for the study of local folk communities and their traditions appeared among Ukrainian folkloristics in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Folk prose collected by Ukrainian folklorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries –P. Kulish, P. Chubynskiy, M. Drahomanov, I. Manzhura, B. Hrinchenko, V. Lesevych, P. Hnidych among others– offers valuable materials to contemporary folklorists who pursue with the study of folk traditions of a certain community over time in its historical dynamics.

Nineteenth century Ukrainian folklorists not only collected a huge amount of narratives but also created a first scientific *basis* of fieldwork and publication of folk texts. At the same time there appears a first interest in the narrators. In his *Notes about South Russia* (1856-1857), P. Kulish underlined

that not only the texts were of interest to him but also the information about performers and the context in which texts were recorded. This was a very unusual approach for the time when main stream folklorists were interested in nothing but the text.

A sharp turn to the narrator happened in Ukrainian folkloristic in the two first decades of the twentieth century. For instance, in his anthology *Materialy z narodnoyi slovesnosti* P. Hnidych gives a full description of the performer, his style, conditions under which the text was recorded as well as non-verbal elements of the performance (gestures, smiles, etc.) He even describes the life story of some performers and notes the information about the source of the text. This proved that times had changed and folklorists got interested in the performer and the context of the performance.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the first studies on narration were published. It is worth mentioning that those articles were prepared by non-folklorists, as the famous Ukrainian writer I. Nechuy-Levitsky for instance. An article deserving special attention was written by I. Franko, "Bel parlar gentile" (1909), where he paid close attention to the artistic communication among villagers, describing as part of folk tradition the conversations among performers while the performance was taking place. He stressed that folklorists should study folklore in a wider context, pay more attention to non-popular prosaic genres and create new approaches for the study of folk communication, which would include the study of context (Franko 1909). All these ideas were revolutionary at the time and if the folklorists were to have paid closer attention to his remarks the contextual approach could have developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately his ideas did not receive a strong support and these questions became vital in Ukrainian folkloristics only in the last half of the twentieth century. Nowadays the study of narrators, their text and context as part of a communicative process is being actively analyzed by the researchers of the Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folkloristics and Ethnology of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences.

This article is part of a research project which also deals with the life of prose tradition in the Ukrainian folk community over the twentieth century.

The anthology of O. Malynka occupies an important place among materials collected by Ukrainian folklorists at the turn of the twentieth century. As already mentioned, his book became a starting point for our field work in contemporary Ploske. During an intensive period of ten years' work in this village we came to unexpected conclusions. Prose texts collected from contemporary narrators with video and audio equipment testify very clearly that, at least in this community, folklore is as alive as ever and its performers and audience are very enthusiastic and active during the artistic communication. Even repeated fixations of the same story by the same performer in different communicative situations go on keeping their own singular character and charm. During our research in Ploske we tried to

follow the “vacuum-cleaner” method (a complete survey, when all the texts are recorded by the fieldworker, independently from their esthetical value). Incidentally, this was the method Malynka used in his fieldwork, and for doing this he was actively criticized by the two most prominent folklorists at the time, B. Hrinchenko and V. Hnatyuk. They argued that his texts were far away from being perfect, some of them Hnatyuk described as being damaged, uninteresting and lifeless (Hnatyuk 1902: 42). Ironically, Malynka’s recordings are far more valuable for contemporary scientists, since they give a clearer picture of the actual life of folk tradition in the community at a particular historical time and give us a chance to make an objective comparative analysis with today’s situation in Ploske.

His anthology has 52 prose texts from Ploske. Unfortunately, texts in Malynka’s publication are not supported by full information about the performers. He only pointed the place where the text was transcribed and sometimes the first or the last name of the performer. But these materials, even with few informations, give today’s folklorists a clear picture of the status of prose tradition in the folklore community at the turn of twentieth century. Our materials, collected at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (we recorded over 300 prose texts; mostly demonological legends and tales), testify that the folk prose tradition in Ploske did not decrease over a century despite the strong belief of most folklorists of the second half of the twentieth century that traditional folk genres are dying and the number of knowledgeable performers continuously decreasing.

Let’s now turn to the village of Ploske as a traditional and typical Ukrainian folk community. It seems to us that the community itself plays a large role in the process of saving and transmitting oral prose over a long period of time and in the formation of the narrator. Apart from the Malynka’s anthology we have a booklet written about Ploske in the late nineteenth century by its parish priest Tr. Stefanovsky, who described every possible aspect of the life in this village at the time (Stefanovsky 1900). This booklet is very helpful for the understanding of the origins of a lifestyle and way of thinking of today’s Ploske residents. The booklet itself is a part of folk tradition in the village. We heard about it for the first time ten years ago during our first field trip. Neither libraries nor archives in Kyiv have this book, and villagers kept referring to each other for a copy of it. When we became quite skeptical about its actual existence, they showed us the book, but did not let us make a copy of it. Some historical legends from this booklet are a strong part of today’s oral tradition in Ploske (for instance the explanation of the nature of Ploske’s name (Ploske in Ukrainian means “flat”), some legends on its history were borrowed by the oral tradition from Stefanovsky’s book.

According to this book Ploske was founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century and it existed for a long time as a rather small hamlet composed by a few independent families. It was signaled for the first time

on the map as a village in the second half of the seventeenth century (Stefanovsky 1900: 5–6). Contemporary Ploske is a large, widely spread village with over a 1000 residences located at 15 km distance from Nizhin (the nearest town in the area). For over one century Ploske kept the traditional way of living (for instance, many villagers are using traditional stoves for cooking despite the fact that nowadays the village has gas). Internal decoration of the houses is quite traditional too (icons and handmade towels and linens are still the main decorative attributes) and this traditional lifestyle influences peoples spiritual life, increases the spread of folklore, helps to preserve the folk inheritance of the past. During the very first expedition to Ploske we found texts which almost word for word correspondent to the texts collected by Malynka and performers whose artistic talent puts them in line with famous Ukrainian twentieth century narrators. Texts recorded from M. Trush (performer of fairy tales), M. Perepechay, E. Kompanec and others gave enough material for the new anthology on contemporary narratives from Ploske.<sup>1</sup> Traditional beliefs preserved in Ploske (in *domovyyk* – the house demon, in witches, return of the dead and others) together with very artistic performances and the existence of a permanent audience give us the right to look at the Ploske as a traditional folk community which can talk not only for itself but is also representative of a typical contemporary folk community of the Ukrainian Polissya.

During our field work we interviewed more than fifty performers, twenty of which can be characterized as active. We are now going to try to give a short description of the types of active performers and a general overview of their repertoire. Typically, the active performers in contemporary Ploske are women over fifty years old with elementary or middle school, born in Ploske or nearby. Of course this description has some exceptions. For instance our best narrator was a man (M. Trush), some of the performers had high school and even college education (as the local school teachers, for example), and we recorded some interesting texts from local children. But generally speaking most of our volunteer-performers were as we described early – older and not highly educated women.

They were the easiest to involve into artistic communication, knew a lot about traditions and what's crucial – they believed in what they said. Folklore is a natural part of their existence and they perform not as much for listeners as for themselves. Over a hundred years ago Tr. Stefanovsky noticed that elderly women are the main bearers of traditional beliefs and superstitions in Ploske. As a priest he strongly opposed such beliefs and

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<sup>1</sup> Materials collected by the authors in Ploske, as well as some theoretical thoughts on the topics of oral text, folk communication, functioning of the oral tradition in time, are presented in an anthology: O. Brytsyna and I. Golovakha, *Prosovyi Folklore sela Ploske na Chernihivshyni. Testy ta rozvidky* ["The prose folklore of Ploske, in Chernihivshyna. Texts and investigations"], Kyiv, Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2004, 534 pp.

hoped that literacy would help villagers to decrease the level of pagan superstitions.

A hundred years went by. We noticed the complete absence of illiterate bearers of folk tradition. Among all our informants only one woman could not read or write. Did Stefanovsky's dream come true? Fortunately for us and tradition itself – it did not. Published sources took their place in the system of traditional beliefs. The very fact that references to books, newspapers, magazines are a prestigious part of contemporary folk communication and highly educated members of the community considered to be the best tellers by everyone else is a clear evidence that folklore found its way to survive and to function in the times when published sources and mass media create an impression of occupants of the minds and spiritual life of our contemporaries. The repertoire of most performers is dependent on the main interests expressed by the audience. That's why mythological legends (especially stories about witches, hosts, dream interpretations) are a large component of contemporary narrative tradition. At the same time full literacy and special respect to published sources create a new type of a performer. A. Dundes pointed out that the wide spread of literary sources is a positive fact because it speeds up the process of oral transmission and widens the objects of folk narration (Dundes 1980: 17).

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we found that traditional beliefs, life style and folk narrations in Ploske did not changed dramatically and certainly the last ones did not decrease in amount or quality. Even the most vulnerable genre, fairy tales, is richly presented in this village. Nevertheless, the contemporary condition of the narrative tradition certainly reflects the process of more or less evident degradation, but it is still alive. Some genres now belong to the passive repertoire, and it is most astonishing how close the correspondence is between the contemporary recordings and those dating back from the end of the nineteenth century.

The striking evidence of verbal coincidence of the different transcriptions of the "same" tale performances provoked scientific curiosity to the process of text transmission in time. We used audio and video equipment to study the everyday oral communicative process and the performers' strategies. A lot of texts were performed in the so-called "natural" contexts, but a big number of recordings took place in different "artificial" contexts. Aspiring to reach the correct comprehension of oral phenomena we tried to combine the advantages of philological textology with the ideas of performance-oriented folklorists, in order to analyze both verbal and non-verbal components of oral performance. Thus the investigation was based on the text records maintained by the reports (Fine 1994: 89-112) which thoroughly mirrored both verbal and paralinguistic components of the communicative process. The comparative study of repeated transcriptions provides a good evidence of the mode of life of prose tradition.



The “third wave” (Honko 1996) of interest in the problem of folklore text arose in recent years. The study of the oral text in performance seems to place at scientists’ disposal the most representative data and to enable them to answer a lot of different questions concerning the very essence of oral tradition and the peculiarities of its functioning. The repetitive recordings of different prose performances<sup>2</sup> and the study of the different modes of the performer’s text-building strategy, either by observation or experimentally, are the efficient way to understand the nature of oral tradition.

We endeavored to record the actual performance of the tales, legends and other narratives, which had been transcribed by our predecessors in Ploske. Using the tape- and video-recorder we have the possibility to compare both the oral performances and their verbal texts within the different temporal intervals (less than one hour, one or two hours, a few days, a few months, a few years or one century). Special attention was paid to the repeated performances of the same narrator in the different communicative situations, and to the recordings made of the “teacher” and his audience with a different time distance.

It is worth mentioning an issue which was intended to “re-implant” the complex text of the tale (ATU 2022) into the repertoire of the young contemporary bearers. This text was recorded in Ploske 100 years ago, but now it is unknown to most local narrators. But they do know and retell the simple text of this tale. Three schoolgirls (one among them is a skilful performer) kept the new text in mind only for a short time. Twelve repeated recordings during two days reveal the peculiarities of memorizing the verbal text. This experiment shows both the power and powerlessness of memory which in this case wasn’t supported by the traditional background. The text was not appreciated by active bearers; therefore it had been forgotten in a few years. The only family where this version of the traditional tale type was in the active repertoire is Ol’ga Trush and her daughter Nadiya Samoylenko. The junior generation inherited the traditional knowledge embodied in the frequently performed tales.

The striking evidence of verbal dependency of the different performances over one century is revealed by the comparison of the verbal texts of the tale “Pro zmiya i Ivana-tsarevycha” (ATU 313A + 313 H\* + 314 A\* + 315) edited by O. Malynka and of the repeated recordings of this tale performed twice on the 19.08.1994 and on the 8.06.1995 by Mykola Trush. The comparison of transcriptions from the late nineteenth century to the tape- and video recordings from the late twentieth century cannot of course be very accurate. Nevertheless we can point to a lot of identical and synonymic segments, as well as structural variants of the verbal text.

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<sup>2</sup> Here we are talking about the text, using this concept in its pure textological sense – namely the verbal text. Dealing with the oral text, we also take into account the accompanying, meaningful non-verbal elements which are essential constituent elements of the performance.

The comparison of the recorded verbal texts as well as the reports mirroring performances gave a possibility to trace some common features through different performances of the “same” narrative. Together with a lot of coincidences in the verbal texts, we can point the typical features of performance (gestures, expressions, intonations etc.). These features of traditional performance had been already noticed in the Abkhazian narrative tradition by Dz. Adleyba (Adleyba 1991).

The study of repeated performances using synoptic comparison of verbal texts (Gatsak 1989: 65–66), and analysis of non-verbal components of these performances, reveals the common features of verbal and non-verbal elements of oral texts. With regard to fourteen repeated recordings of the tale “Stryzhene – breylene” (ATU 1365 A) which were performed during 1994–2003 by Motrya Perepechay and E. Kompanec’, we cannot trace the exact verbal coincidence even in those texts that were performed over a very short period (e.g., 10 hours or 6 days). But the constituent role of the slightly varying keywords is obvious: *choloviik; zhinka uperta / uporna / nastojchiva / byedova / protivna; dokazyue / zavelysya; stryzhene / postrygly; breylene / pobrejily; rozoryvsya / rozozlyvsya; byt’ / luyt’ / dusyt’; tikat’ / gnat’sya; v vodu zakhodyt’ / v vody zalizla / v stavok u toj uskochyla / zahnav u vodu; potopaje / zovsim topycya / holova khovayecya; ruku vhory podnyala / pal’cyamy pokazuye (nozhyci); ne pokorylasya / svoye dokazala* (husband; wife obstinate / stubborn / persistent / disagreeable / willful; to assert / to argue; shorn to a short length / cut; to shave / clean shaven; to get angry / to shout; to beat up / to give a severe beating / to suffocate; to run away / to overtake; to get into the water / to come into the water / to jump into the lake; drown / sink / be drowned / submerge; to raise hands / to imitate scissors with one’s fingers; do not submit / proved).

It is worth mentioning that the compressed text performed by E. Kompanec’ is composed mainly of keywords. Comparing the texts of the different performances of M. Perepechay and E. Kompanec’, we can see the common keywords, but they are more variable. As to the non-verbal elements, we can trace the striking stability of gestures, accompanying the keyword “stryzhene” in all performances (two fingers imitating the movement of scissors). We can observe these typical gestures in the different performances of M. Perepechay and E. Kompanec’. The only mentioning of this traditional plot provokes both performers to gesticulate in a special way (this gestures in different performances are mirrored by photos made in 2002-2005 during the repeated performances of two narrators). This instance is the norm for many repeated performances of the different narratives.

The study of everyday oral communicative process shows the availability of various text-building strategies used by performers of different oral narrative genres. Observation and experiments prove that in the real process of everyday communication the appearance of the text greatly depends on



the circumstances of its performance. This is right either for the long fairy tales or for short anecdotes, the texts of which had never been quite identical in the different repeated recordings. We can also state that each genre has its own mode of performance and its oral text more or less depends upon the peculiarities of the communicative context.

Together with this –and as it was stated elsewhere concerning the traditional humorous tales (Britsyna 1989: 103-104)– each of the different parts of text (its formulas, non-formulaic expressions, keywords etc.) takes shape in a special way from one performance to another. Thus the oral text has different levels of internal organization and variation. The text which wasn't memorized by the listener who performed it later can be reproduced with the help of originally flexible keywords, formulaic elements of the verbal text, and non-verbal stereotypes of performance.

Traditional knowledge as a norm is embodied in the different verbal texts. But we can also notice the obvious verbal dependency of the different performances, and the likeness between the non-verbal elements of the different oral texts. We hope that this shed light upon one aspect of this problem – the presence and the measure of verbal and non-verbal dependency in different performances of prose narratives.

The repeated recordings of the various types are very good evidences of the textual dependency. They also prove that only a small part of the verbal text can be identical in different performances. Even formulas are alterable. But some parts of the verbal text, especially keywords, can be more or less stable. They point to essential concepts, which are closely linked with the plot and the theme of given narrative. Therefore the keywords are comparatively stable in the different repeated recordings of the same narrative. We can trace them even in those cases when the verbal texts of the different repeated recordings diverge a great deal on the whole. The study of the numerous verbal texts gives evidence of what might be called a “skeleton function” of keywords in the narrative. The comparison of the relatively more stable verbal texts of tales, for instance, with laments, which are noticeably dependent on context, shows the equal role of the keywords both in the text of the tale and in the text of the lament. A justification of this phenomenon may be possibly hidden in the particularities of the process of the text's shrinking in memory, already analyzed by psycho linguists (Zhyntkin 1982). These studies reveal an essential role of keywords in the process of compressing the text in the memory.

During the experiments we've often observed the compressed texts in the natural context of communication. They are chiefly consisting of keywords attributive for a given narrative. We've observed a lot of cases of immediate response of performer when the new listeners joined the audience. Usually they repeated the story in a few words, chiefly using the keywords characteristic to this plot. These compressed texts are extremely informative. The density of the keywords is very high in them.

In many cases the keywords are linked with the different non-verbal elements of the oral text. For instance, we can point the above mentioned regular repetition of different gestures linked with some traditional plots.

A certain stability of keywords, formulas and themes, stereotypic ways of performance, may lead to the conclusion that performers are memorizing the text more or less accurately. We can also point to a lot of bearers' assertions about their memorization of the text. But the estimation about the accurate verbal reproduction of the text is in general an illusion (Lord 1979-1980), or rather it is better to say that it reflects the *specific mode* of memorization inherent in oral texts which seems to differ with folklore genres. It would be more nearly correct to speak about the recollection of the text, but not about memorization and to refer to distinct measures of embodiment of formulas, formulaic utterances, keywords and non-formulaic expressions. We can't say, then, that the performer "receives" the text for transmission. But he does receive a cluster of possibilities for its performance, even in cases where the text was heard only once, because the bearer inherits the traditional mode of oral performance, confer the ideas of "volume" knowledge (Gatsak 1989) and the "mental text" (Honko 1979-1980). The constructive role of keywords in the development of performers' traditional competence is considerable.

In spite of the evident verbal dependency of the different oral texts, in some cases we can't qualify it as a result of memorization. This feature may be caused by the stable components of the communicative situation. The flexible verbal text of legends and memorates often reflects the peculiarities of the communicative event. Performing narratives for "outsiders", storytellers often try to give additional information, linked with the keywords, which may be unknown to listeners. Such explanations can be traced in many verbal texts. They are quite "stable", but none of them are memorized, although all of them reflect the stability of the main features of the communicative situation.

All these observations lead us to conclude that the performer creates his text freely each time, depending either on the demands (and limits) of traditional poetics or the circumstances of the communicative situation. His memory holds the keywords, which manifest variably and may be considered as concepts. They are deeply linked with the traditional themes and plots of narratives. Because of this, the performer orients himself on the theme, on the formulaic elements of the verbal text, which are accompanied by the more or less stable, non-verbal elements of the oral text. Therefore the oral texts composed under the guidance of tradition are usually marked by the common textual (verbal and non-verbal) features, accumulating the "memory of tradition" and mirroring its "chronological depth".

Inherited from the previous generations, traditional knowledge can be preserved by its keepers only in live communication between performer and audience. The traditional narrative repertoire and the traditional mode of its

presentation are fully embodied in the creative activity of those performers who have interested listeners.

Our research on a contemporary Ukrainian agricultural community showed that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century traditional beliefs, life style and folk narrations did not change dramatically, and the last ones certainly did not decrease in amount or quality and got their way of functioning in the modern world. Our theoretical assumptions combined with the collection of prose texts collected in Ploske in the course of ten years creates a realistic picture of the functioning of tradition over the last century. This may help present and future folklorists to see that despite the common belief about the dwindling and death of folk tradition, a specific situation in a particular traditional community is showing that folk genres, active traditions and knowledgeable bearers are very much alive.

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