

## NOTAS E RECENSÕES

### CULTURE AND SYMBOLS. SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT BENGT HOLBEK'S INTERPRETATION OF FAIRY TALES

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Bengt Holbek's monumental study of fairy tales,<sup>1</sup> published in 1987, brought him immediately well deserved international recognition.

Some reviewers have wondered whether the poor peasants of Jutland could really master such a complicated symbolic system as the language of fairy tales postulated by Holbek, arguing among other things that it took him forty pages or so to interpret the tale of *King Wivern*. To my mind, this is no valid objection. Whether Holbek's "language of fairy tales" exists or not, the poor peasants of Jutland *could* have mastered it without any difficulty. All human cultures, no matter how "primitive", have mastered that most complex of all symbolic systems, human natural language. Thanks to its double articulation, every human language can generate an unlimited number of messages with the help of some thirty-five phonemes, a few thousand monemes and numerous syntactic rules. In comparison, Holbek's "language of fairy tales", with its three paradigmatic oppositions, five syntagmatic moves and seven transformation rules, is extremely simple. Some might even say too simple! That it took him forty pages to unravel this language in the tale of *King Wivern* only reflects the fact that analysis is by definition analytical, whereas artistic experience is synthetic. Listening to a symphony hardly takes more than half an hour, while its transcription into classical notation fills a whole book. Surely this does not invalidate the notation system. The crucial point here is that the mastering of a symbolic system can be *operative* while remaining *unreflected* (I refrain deliberately from using the word "unconscious", which I find rather misleading). In the same way, I would claim that Danish peasants were on the whole unable to formulate in theoretical terms the rules of Danish grammar. And yet, no-one would seriously deny that they did master Danish language, a most complicated symbolic system indeed!

Holbek's claim that Danish story-tellers of fairy tales needed a symbolic language in order to express in veiled terms forbidden feelings and conflicts too acute to be talked about openly has also been disputed. It has been argued that the leaving of home by young children, for example, or the meeting of boys and girls, far from being crises, were very common in traditional peasant societies, and even regulated by popular rituals. But although I, too, would deny that the use of a symbolic

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<sup>1</sup> Bengt Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales. Danish Folklore in a European Perspective* ("FFC", 239), Helsinki, 1987.

language results from the need for a "secret" language (more about that later), I am rather puzzled by this line of argument. Common as they may be, the leaving of home or the meeting of boys and girls are not "natural" on that ground. That these essential phases in the lives of rural youths were problematic is proved, I think, by the very fact that they were, indeed, regulated by popular rituals. As I see it, the function of popular rituals (and of all symbolic productions, story-telling included) is precisely to come to terms on a collective level with the facts of life and their inherent contradictions.

Another point of discussion raised by Holbek's method has been to what extent his model could be generalised. For example, the Swedish folklorist Inger Lövkrona<sup>2</sup> has pointed out that Holbek goes directly from the social and economic background to the tales, thus short-cutting the cultural aspect. In contrast, she praises the French folklorist Yvonne Verdier and her seminal study of Little Red Riding-Hood in French folk tradition.<sup>3</sup> This is why, according to Inger Lövkrona, Holbek's paradigmatic model is far too general. His three oppositions (Old vs Young, Male vs Female, High vs Low), are universal but empty, and first acquire meaning when embodied in more specific, cultural figures. While his syntagmatic model on the other hand is too particular to be extended fruitfully to "a more general theory of meaning in folklore". These are strong points of critic, which deserve to be taken seriously.

What made Verdier's "Grand'mères, si vous saviez..." so exciting when it first appeared —indeed, what makes the work of contemporary French folklorists so exciting— is the way they read through a tale or a custom an underlying network of related values, a common frame of references, in short a common culture. And yet, this type of studies always seems to me to solve only half of the puzzle of "meaning". For a tale, and for that matter a legend, a ballad or a ritual, is not just a collection of motifs rooted in local culture. It is also a textual organisation in its own right. Its meaning depends not only on its reference to a common cultural background, but mostly, in the last resort, to the special way in which those references are integrated into a coherent whole.

Perhaps we ought to take Holbek's metaphor, "the *language* of fairy tales", seriously for a while. In the same way as human language is made up of both *langue* and *parole*, to use Saussure's terminology, an item of folklore can be said to express both an *individual* urge to tell a message —its *parole*— and an underlying, *collective*, mostly unreflected mental system —its *langue*. And just as the *langue* of a natural language consists of a *vocabulary* and a *syntax*, the folklore of a given community can

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<sup>2</sup> Inger Lövkrona, "Sagor – farliga drömmar om en bättre värld? Tankar kring en sagoavhandling", *Rig*, 72: 3 (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Verdier. "Grand'mères, si vous saviez... *Le Petit Chapeau Rouge* dans la Tradition Orale". *Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, 4 (1978).

be said to consist of a culture-bound frame of references, a set of images, motifs and values (its vocabulary) and a set of combination rules (its syntax).

Now surely, a tale, a proverb and a popular ritual, while sharing a common vocabulary, will be ruled by largely different combination rules. The layer of meaning which is genre-specific should not be by-passed. To my mind, one of the drawbacks of the *Little Red Riding-Hood* type of interpretations is that they consider stories, songs, proverbs and customs within a given culture as equivalent. Moreover, they regard the various versions of a given tale type as equivalent. Indeed the different versions are supposed to support and explain each other, they are considered as transformations of each other. This was explicitly the case in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths. Whether such a view is valid as far as myths are concerned I cannot tell. This would require detailed evidence about the anthropology of speech in connection with the ritual telling of myths. But I do not think it is valid as far as tales are concerned. As I have argued elsewhere, we need a typology of variants.<sup>4</sup> To use the terminology which I have suggested for legends, Verdier regards all variants of a tale as either cumulative (they add precision to each other) or as *completive* (they fill up the holes presented by other versions). She is blind to the fact that different versions of a tale can be *mutually exclusive*. Such an approach to the interpretation of tales presupposes a conception of story tellers as passive tradition bearers, a view that is invalidated by detailed investigations of this question and which has been abandoned by most modern folklorists. In short, cultural studies of tales of the Verdier type, illuminating as they may be, tell us more about the culture they are part of than about the tales themselves. If I may be allowed to stretch my metaphor a little further, this type of studies analyse mostly the vocabulary of the tale, but they hardly touch upon its syntax, whether this is genre specific (due to the poetics of the fairy tale as a genre), or tale-specific (due to the hard core of meaning common to all versions of the tale type). And they ignore the *parole* of the tale (the story-teller's active remodelling of his/her tradition).

Ideally, the comprehensive study of a tale would attempt to unravel both its cultural context (its vocabulary), its inner paradigmatic and syntagmatic organisation (its syntax), and the story-teller's personal choice of motifs and combination rules (its *parole*). Scholars of the Verdier school have focussed upon the vocabulary, Holbek upon both the genre specific system in his chapter "The Method" and on the *parole* of five story tellers in his chapter "The Application". But the ideal combination of all three approaches can only be pursued at the same time for one given culture area. To attempt a "general theory of meaning in folklore" that also included the cultural aspect, as Inger Lövkrona seems to request, seems to me chimeric. It would amount

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<sup>4</sup> Michèle Simonsen, "La Variabilité dans les légendes. Les récits danois sur les loups-garous", in Veronica Görög-Karady (ed.), *D'un conte à l'autre: La variabilité dans la littérature orale*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1990.

to try and outline a general theory of language that included a detailed description of the vocabulary of all human languages!

As I see it, Holbek's purpose is not so much to describe the fairy tale repertoire of the Danish peasants from last century as to outline the general language system of European fairy tales through the detailed study of some Danish fairy tales. And this, I think, makes a difference. It is precisely because Holbek attempts to outline the *general* language of a *specific* genre that his paradigmatic model (the vocabulary) is so general, while his syntagmatic model (the genre specific syntax) is too strict to be extended to folklore in general. Granted, the three oppositions of the paradigmatic model (Old vs Young, Male vs Female, High vs Low) are very general oppositions, which will take different forms in different cultures. And yet, I would not say that these are universal, "empty" forms. Other times, other social milieux, other folk genres will probably display, even at such a general, precultural level, equally broad, but different oppositions, more directly relevant to their respective social make-up (for example Life vs Death, Human vs God, Clan vs Individual, Pleasure vs Duty, etc.).

Verdier interprets the motifs of a tale by reference to similar motifs in the story-teller's culture. Holbek interprets them by reference to a) their place in the syntagmatic chain of the story and b) the *process* by which feelings and notions have been *transformed* into concrete figures. I see no contradiction between these two approaches. Indeed, whenever Holbek was teased about his supposedly far-fetched sexual interpretation of symbols, he had no difficulty making his point by referring to similar motifs in proverbs, jokes and facetious tales, where the metaphoric meaning is quite unequivocal.

Holbek's approach linked the meaning of the tale's motifs to their narrative function, which is to my mind an important breakthrough in folktale research. In so doing however, Holbek tended to give too much weight to the celebrated "symbolic equivalence of allomotifs" postulated by Alan Dundes. For surely the narrative function of a motif does not exhaust its meaning. Let us take as an example the tale of *The Princess on the Glass Mountain* (AT 530). Holbek argues, rightly I think, that since the girl is put on top of the mountain sometimes by her father and sometimes by a troll, and since both variants fill in exactly the same "slot" in the plot of the story, we are entitled to interpret the troll as a symbol of the father. So far so good. But even so, the listener will not experience the version with a troll in quite the same way as the version with the father. Surely, a troll conveys secondary connotations which are different from those conveyed by a father, in addition to the main core of meaning, a hostile father figure, common to both motifs in this story. A motif has many connotations, all of them contribute to its meaning. Ignoring them leads to reductionism, that is to boiling down the diversity and richness of the tale versions to the unity of the tale type, or even worse, the diversity of tale types to the unity of a fairy tale prototype.

This is why on the whole I find Holbek's part IV ("The Application") less satisfying than his part III ("The Method"). Not because the concrete tales resist the model; they fit remarkably well on the whole. Rather because, in his search for the common language of fairy tales, Holbek is led to emphasize the symbolic equivalence of allomotifs to the expense of their (different) secondary connotations. This does not invalidate his analysis. His syntagmatic and paradigmatic models, his transformation rules prove to be adequate tools to understand the characters, episodes and symbols of the tales. But he can only skim the detailed richness of the concrete messages.

Could it be that it is precisely at that surface level of secondary connotations, which comes on top of the symbolic equivalence of allomotifs, that cultural differences come in? Holbek's method enables us to understand the symbols of fairy tales. But only through specific, cultural studies can we account for the fact that a given community chooses to express a given "feeling" through one symbol rather than through another.

The "feelings" mentioned by Holbek are not just individual emotions. Cultural ideas are not only cognitive, they also include attitudes and values, and are, in short, emotional reactions to reality. But Holbek's claim that the tales use symbolic language in order to express feelings too dangerous to be mentioned openly is perhaps slightly misleading. Personally, I would rather put it this way: tales express collective feelings, parental dependence, sibling hostility, sexual emotions, social resentment and ambitions, etc. through stories and symbols, not because these feelings are forbidden or too dangerous to be talked about openly; rather because they fill up so much in the collective experience of a community that people take pleasure in weaving around them endless variations of scenarios in which they can project themselves, their friends and their foes. Why does mankind take pleasure in telling stories at all is a tantalizing question. My guess would be that stories provide the best possible compromise between personal gratification (as dreams do) and moral imperatives (as normative literature does). Stories fulfill both the need to understand life as it is and to dream of life as it ought to be. Many fairy tales, after all, have been told to men and women, to older and younger people alike. They allow members of the audience to identify both with the kind and the unkind girl, both with the mature girl and the immature boy, both with the ambitious youth and the hostile father-in-law. And fairy tales tell these stories with the help of symbols, not because these are signals in a secret, coded language; but because symbols are synthetic, polysemic pictures, which arouse in the listener's mind many associations. Some of them are universal, some of them quite personal, most of them are culture specific. I am convinced that Danish peasants of last century understood the tales and their symbols immediately and without difficulties. But to understand a tale does not mean to decode a secret message. It means to be able to weave around pictures a never-ending flow of collective, mental and emotional associations.

In short, story-tellers use symbols not because they need a secret language, but because man is a creative, symbol-making animal. What is fascinating is not that all tales of magic are built up upon the same few narrative patterns out of the same few emotions and ideas; but on the contrary, that the same few basic emotions and ideas can generate an infinite number of concrete pictures and stories.

CAMARENA LAURICICA, JULIO, e CHEVALIER, MAXIME, *CATÁLOGO TIPOLÓGICO DEL CUENTO FOLKLÓRICO ESPAÑOL: CUENTOS DE ANIMALES*, MADRID, GREDOS, 1997, 477 PPS.

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Como é sabido, o índice internacional de Antti Aarne e Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, guia universal por que todas as classificações de contos populares se regem (ou devem reger), está conflagradamente desactualizado e enferma de falhas cada vez mais patentes. Com efeito, já na sua última revisão (de 1961!), eram gritantes as lacunas e inconsistências. Basta lembrar que, nos mais de dois mil tipos propostos, Portugal aparece representado em apenas dois. Assim, para que uma nova edição actualizada deste manual venha a representar melhor a realidade do *corpus* de todos os países, é necessário um esforço conjunto, soma dos esforços de cada país, na catalogação dos seus contos. É o que em Espanha, à imagem do que tem acontecido noutros países, se está finalmente a fazer.

Dois anos após a saída do I volume (*Cuentos Maravillosos*) do óptimo projecto de publicação do catálogo do conto tradicional espanhol, que oportunamente referimos ("Bons Ventos de Espanha", *E.L.O.*, 2, pp. 247-8), cabe-nos o prazer de dar conta do aparecimento do II volume, *Cuentos de Animales*, que, juntamente com o primeiro, se vem revelando um precioso e indispensável instrumento de trabalho, o qual muito tem facilitado o nosso próprio projecto de catalogação e classificação dos contos portugueses publicados. Isto porque, tal como no volume anterior, esta obra inclui, na bibliografia de cada tipo analisado, para além das versões espanholas (por áreas), das versões literárias e das correlações com os índices hispano-americanos, os contos portugueses. A obra em questão é fruto de uma tarefa gigantesca, que, a julgar pelo ritmo a que tem vindo à luz, promete estar completa num futuro não muito distante. Pelo apuro e profissionalismo com que tem sido elaborada, tem-se revelado uma referência extremamente útil para a nossa tarefa de classificação dos contos portugueses, em que colmatamos, naturalmente, as inevitáveis omissões de contos não constantes do *corpus* espanhol (e ainda aqui com a ajuda de elementos que nos têm sido generosamente oferecidos por Julio Camarena, em verdadeiro espírito de solidariedade profissional), assim como de versões publicadas não constantes do catálogo espanhol, por serem alvo de uma pesquisa necessariamente mais minuciosa, que, em Portugal, é possível levar a cabo e que temos vindo a fazer paralelamente à classificação das grandes colecções.

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