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## "A Performer-Centered Study of Narration: A Review Article", Review of Linda Dégh, *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*

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"A Performer-Centered Study of Narration: A Review Article", Review of  
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**Abstract**

An Hungarian in America, Linda Dégh lives the ideal of a Malinowskian fieldworker. After immigrating to the United States and joining the faculty of the famous Folklore Institute at Indiana University in the 60s, she has become a participant in and an observer of American life, conducting research among native Midwesterners and Hungarian immigrants in towns like Bloomington, Evansville, Indiana, as well as the highly industrial Calumet Region, particularly in Gary, Indiana. Dégh arrived in the United States as a mature and accomplished scholar, after conducting extensive field research in her native Hungary, and winning the coveted Pitré Prize in 1963. Her books from that period are among the classics of ethnographic folklore (Dégh 1962, 1969, 1995a). In the United States she has extended her method and observed and analyzed her storytelling immigrants as they negotiate their social and narrative worlds between their old and new countries, between their rural beliefs and practices and their homes that are filled with electronic devices, telephones, and television sets. At the same time Dégh has been a major contributor to and a commentator on the changing trends in folkloristics, and in the last thirty years she has emerged as the leading Europeanist in American folklore studies.

**Disciplines**

American Studies | Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History

## A Performer-Centered Study of Narration

### A Review Article

Dan Ben-Amos

An Hungarian in America, Linda Dégh lives the ideal of a Malinowskian fieldworker. After immigrating to the United States and joining the faculty of the famous Folklore Institute at Indiana University in the 60s, she has become a participant in and an observer of American life, conducting research among native Midwesterners and Hungarian immigrants in towns like Bloomington, Evansville, Indiana, as well as in the highly industrial Calumet Region, particularly in Gary, Indiana. Dégh arrived in the United States as a mature and accomplished scholar, after conducting extensive field research in her native Hungary, and winning the coveted Pitré Prize in 1963. Her books from that period are among the classics of ethnographic folklore (Dégh 1962, 1969, 1995*a*). In the United States she has extended her method and observed and analyzed her storytelling immigrants as they negotiate their social and narrative worlds between their old and new countries, between their rural beliefs and practices and their homes that are filled with electronic devices, telephones, and television sets. At the same time Dégh has been a major contributor to and a commentator on the changing trends in folkloristics, and in the last thirty years she has emerged as the leading Europeanist in American folklore studies.

In her "Narratives in Society" Linda Dégh includes twenty, mostly previously published, articles that address issues of theory and method and in the main draw upon her field research in the United States.<sup>1</sup> She has grouped them into four parts: 1. "Creativity of Storytellers," 2. "Worldview: Between Fantasy and Reality," 3. "Conduits of Transmission," and 4. "Case Studies from the Modern Industrial World." But the essay that offers the clue for her approach and expresses the pungent spirit of her scholarship is in none of these. Rather it is the "Introduction" to the volume, aptly titled "What Can Gyula Ortutay and the Budapest School Offer to Contemporary Students of Narrative?" (7–29). Implicitly and explicitly, in

this essay she pits her own paradigm of the Budapest school of ethnographic folklore against the American folklore trend that has emerged out of the "Ethnography of Speaking" approach (Hymes 1974; Bauman and Sherzer 1974) and is currently known as performance-centered studies (Bauman 1977; Bauman and Briggs 1990). Most of the other essays in the volume substantiate the adequacy of her theoretical approach and demonstrate the lasting validity of the teachings of her mentor Gyula Ortutay.

During the past quarter of a century folklore studies in America have taken a new turn. Conveniently dated to 1972 and to the volume "Toward New Perspectives in Folklore" that Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman edited, folklore research made a decisive shift, incorporating and synthesizing new trends in anthropology, linguistics, and semiotics. At that time older concepts like "performance" were rejuvenated with new meanings in folkloristic discourse and from it emanated to anthropology, history, and literature, twisting in the process the sense the term had in generative grammar (Ben-Amos 1997; Kapchan 1995). Linda Dégh did not but should have had an article in that volume. Around that period she published two seminal articles, that complemented the then new American trend with European-based methods (Dégh 1975, Dégh and Vázsonyi 1969).

The subtitle of the present volume succinctly addresses the essence of her argument. In face of a growing modern interest in *performance* Dégh calls for a *performer-centered* approach. In a Chekhovian fashion she admonishes scholars not to forget the human being who is behind the text they analyze. She implicitly perceives in contemporary folkloristic and linguistic scholarship a tendency to foreground discourse and to neglect its speakers. Such a tendency had its precedence in the comparative analysis that dissects a narrative to its motifs, and in the structural-morphological study that sequences the tale functions or motifs, and now continues, according to Dégh, in the poetic interpretation that discovers in narratives principles of rhetorical strategies. All these trends, which do not necessarily share the same premises, appear to center upon words and marginalize their speakers. Dégh proposes that the teaching of her mentor Gyula Ortutay represents principles of humanistic anthropology and folklore that considers the cultural world and personal biography of narrators and singers as interpretive and analytical keys that could and should complement contemporary trends in the study of narration.

1 Dégh, Linda: *Narratives in Society. A Performer-Centered Study of Narration*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1995. 401 pp. ISBN 951-41-0747-0. (Folklore Fellows Communications, 255) Price: Fmk 180,00.

The attainment of an adequate interpretive balance between the speaker and text is a perennial problem that plagues folklore research with back and forth pendulum swings that alludes resolution. Any performance-centered analysis does not deny the role of the performer; nor does it deny the significance of worldview, belief system, and personal biography in the articulation of traditional texts. Yet the precise method that establishes the relations between cultural and personal background and foregrounded and performed narratives, songs, and proverbs still remains an analytical goal, rather than a tested practice. Anecdotal information is abundant and valuable in illuminating private cases, but so far it does not amount to a systematic method. Linda Dégh's essays which have a literary descriptive texture and insightful theoretical sophistication, often highlight the difficulties in relating the performer to his performance rather than formulate analytical principles that would articulate them.

The consequence is theoretical incongruity. The ethnographic folklore of Gyula Ortutay and the Budapest school is important in its own rights, but it does not share conceptual premises with the ethnography of folklore that performance-centered study espouses. Therefore it is possible to regard the studies in this volume as a valuable alternative approach rather than a contribution to current narrative analysis. The essay "Biology of Storytelling" (47–61) makes these theoretical differences apparent. At first glance it seems as if for Linda Dégh the term "biology" is analogous to "performance" in contemporary discourse. She points out that "[t]he term signals a change in concentration from the static view of artificially constructed and isolated oral narrative sequences, to the dynamics of telling and transmitting stories from person to person and from people to people, through means of direct contact, interaction, and resulting processes responsible for the formation and continual recreation of narratives" (47). The Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow was the first to use the notion "the biology of tradition," and for him it was a part of the ecological model for diffusion of narratives that he constructed. In spite of the apparent similarities in interpretation the two terms "biology" and "performance" of narratives are markedly different: the former has organic connotations that are absent from the latter. While Dégh discusses the subject with her characteristic erudition and thoroughness, she does not free her analysis from the organic premises and metaphors with which von Sydow imbued the concept. For her, *homo narrans* is inevitably *homo agrarian*,

creating and recreating stories as plants and social commodities that are subject to diffusion, rather than as acts of performances situated in social events. The concern with transmission of narratives inspired Linda Dégh (together with her late husband Andrew Vázsonyi) to propose one of the most innovative ideas about this subject. The essay "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore" (173–212) has revolutionized scholarly thinking about the transmission of tales in society. They hypothesized, and demonstrated the validity of their proposal with selected examples, that narrators have a generic aptitude for distinct narrative forms and accordingly transmit their stories to equally receptive storytellers. Hence the diffusion of tales and their recreation follow several human transmission lines.

The performer-centered study of narration has, of course, an intrinsic value regardless of its implicit polemics. Linda Dégh explores the belief system of Hungarian immigrants in the United States beyond the generic implications of their narratives. If legends are narratives that command total belief on the part of the narrators and listeners, she demonstrates that, confronting rational attitudes, some members of the community develop skepticism toward beliefs that were held firm in Hungary. She suggests, that as far as the supernatural is concerned it is possible to be a believer and a skeptic at the same time. Belief in the veracity of narratives is subject to negotiation. In the same community different storytellers can believe, doubt, or right out deny the truth in a legend. Immigrants and long time residents have modified their long held beliefs under the influence of education, contact with other ethnic group, and mass media. The legend is one of Dégh favorite genres. She is able to elicit its narration in informal occasions as part of casual conversations. In one essay, "The Legend Conduit" (341–357), she describes a return visit to Hungary, to the village of Kakasd where she has conducted her fieldwork between 1948 and 1960. Being able to free herself from the manipulative control of her host, she is able to interact freely with other members of the community and listen to conversations in their normal flow, finding legends to be an integral part of such a communication. Several essays in this volume are concerned with this genre: "The Legend Teller" (79–89), "The Crack on the Red Goblet, or Truth in Modern Legend" (with Andrew Vázsonyi) (152–170), "Processes of Legend Formation" (226–235), "Symbiosis of Joke and Legend: A Case of Conversational Folklore," (285–305). The narrative themes that run through these essays

involve beliefs in modern supernatural phenomena, such as UFO's, haunted houses, and ghostly apparitions. Such beliefs, and the narratives that underscore them, are an integral part of the American urban and rural conversations. As a sensitive observer Linda Dégh is a specially attuned to the dialogues that generate such themes and negotiate their way into life in industrial communities.

The ethnicity of the immigrants manifests itself not only in belief but also in humor. The article on "The Jokes of an Irishman in a Multiethnic Urban Environment" (325–340) includes a rare transcription of a social gathering in which the Irish negotiate their own ethnicity in jokes. The adequacy of the transcription makes this report an excellent primary text for performance analysis (cf. Norrick 1993).

The immigrants whose life Dégh describes, often with a pen of a novelist, tell their stories in a world in which not only literacy exists, but also where television is the dominant means of entertainment. She does not try to resurrect a world of pristine orality in order to study narrators and their audiences. Rather she integrate TV watching, phone conversations and newspaper reading into the world of oral storytelling, taking for granted a culture that is not only multiethnic but also multimedia. Television was introduced also into her old village of Kakasd, and Dégh does not bemoan this fact but rather regards it as a challenge.

Linda Dégh's criticism of recent folklore scholarship is not limited to the "Introduction." In one of the last essays in the volume she writes: "In recent years, much has been written about performance of folklore, but most of the 'innovative' [sic] ideas and theories did not take their departure from existing folklore trends" (325 f.). The feeling of being "left out" and the view that the novelty of recent ideas should be put in quotation marks is unfortunately a painful part of the scholarly process that most of us experience at one point or another. The reasons for such situations differ. Partially it is a result of lack of knowledge, partially the consequence of ever so little differences that complicate the relations of theoretical continuity and change. Dégh's solid ethnographic description of storytelling would resonate with some other scholarly trends. For example, while the terminology of the postmodern discourse is foreign to Dégh, at times her ethnographic sensitivity imbues her writing with the most recent anthropological colors. Performer-centered research is necessary. Dégh, and Gyula Ortutay before her, gave it a solid foundation upon which future ethnographic folklorists will be able to build. In doing so, they

will be able to create a methodological synthesis between performer and performance-centered approaches that could enrich the study of narration.

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