

On the History of an Anecdote: The Fly and the Flea

Evgenii Kostiukhin (1938-2006)
Herzen State Pedagogical University
Saint Petersburg, Russia

Translated from Russian by James Bailey,
with assistance from James P. Leary (1)

Abstract

This article explores the historical antecedents to the Russian anecdote which remarks on the reactions by various nationalities' to finding a fly in their soup and considers the function of such anecdotes in their popular usage.

Among folk anecdotes a majority of themes are connected with the way people of various nationalities act in situations. In regard to their structure such anecdotes present a complication of the classic pair—"smart-stupid." The customary antithesis is blurred and becomes complicated insofar as several characters enter the action. One or more remain simpletons and one turns out to be more cunning (generally speaking "intelligent"), but the remaining ones cannot be included in the usual parameters.

What is the point of anecdotes about people of various nationalities, who have turned out to be in an unusual situation? It would be possible to think that it is reduced to the self-assertion of the people to whom the teller belongs and to the ridicule of "other people." (I will remark parenthetically that the problem of "the other" in a national culture is complex, that it is connected psychologically with the notion of the "scapegoat," and we will refrain from any generalizations, limiting ourselves to anecdotes). Self-assertion is appropriate for single-episode anecdotes with a pair of characters (such as anecdotes about a Russian and a gypsy in Old Russian folklore, where the other always remains a simpleton). Yet an increase in the number of the people also increases the possible shades of meaning in an anecdote. Such an anecdote can no longer be reduced to the triumph or defeat of a jokester or to the mockery of a simpleton.

However, the issue is not only the more complicated structure. Any folklore forms—including those that may be anecdotal—have their own history, which often has existed for centuries. In the course of its history such a form not only undergoes various kinds of transformation, but also is absorbed into various cultural contexts. This process enriches its meaning.

I would like to verify the correctness of these suppositions on the basis of a contemporary Russian anecdote about a fly that has fallen in a bowl of soup. Here is how this anecdote was told in a Moscow student milieu about forty years ago (if my memory doesn't betray me, it was "stimulated" by the World-Wide Festival of young people and students in Moscow in 1957).

Young people of various nationalities ordered soup in a restaurant and a fly fell into each person's bowl. An Englishman, not saying a word, put his money on the table and left the restaurant without touching the soup. A Frenchman banged his bowl of soup against a wall and, waving his arms, demanded that they bring him another bowl. A German tidily put the fly on the edge of the bowl and silently ate all the soup. A Russian ate the soup while blowing the fly away from himself the whole time. A Chinese ate the fly, but didn't touch the soup. A Jew ate the soup, sucked on the fly, and chased it over to the Chinese.

Let us for the moment refrain from commentaries and seek close and distant analogies for the Russian anecdote. It turns out that the anecdote about the fly that fell in a soup dish, as they say, "had a beard" [i.e., a Russian proverbial expression for something with a long history]. It is well known in an old Polish instance of the seventeenth century, "Three flies—Italian, Polish, and German." Here the fly simultaneously falls in the kasha of a Pole, a German, and an Italian. The Pole puts the bowl aside and demands another portion. The Italian tosses the bowl of kasha on the floor. The German catches the fly, diligently licks it, throws it out the window, and then quietly eats his kasha.

Gathering people of various nationalities was a common device for the theater of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [i.e. the European theater, including its Russian manifestations]. A Jew and a Pole, a Cossack and a Turk, a Muscovite and a Gypsy, and an Italian and a Greek in various combinations all were frequent guests on the stage at that time. Foreign attire provokes laughter, a newly arrived stranger mispronounces our speech; here you do not have to rack your brains for comic devices—these are ready-made comic masks.

The choice of nationalities in the foregoing Russian anecdote and in the Polish variant is not accidental. Only a youth festival could bring together people of various nationalities—from an Englishman to a Chinaman, supplemented by the Jew, a traditional figure for Russian anecdotes. For seventeenth century Poland the strongest economic ties were with Germany, while the strongest cultural ties were with Italy, especially as the fires of the Renaissance were burning down. The fact that there were half as many characters in the Polish variant is also understandable: a mono-episodic anecdote did not involve many people—only two or three were more than sufficient. We will remark that a reduction in the number of characters does not occur without affecting the topic: the fewer characters there are the more important each one of them becomes. No one acquires greater importance in the Russian anecdote.

The closer we approach the end of the narrative, the more grotesque the conduct of each character becomes. In the Polish variant the conduct of the Pole turned out to be the most appropriate: he simply demanded another bowl of kasha, whereas the Italian acted too demonstratively, and the German was satisfied with what he had. But these are finer points; there is a single source for all these reactions—a tradition of anecdotes. Let us refer to the authoritative opinion of P. N. Berkov: "There are no doubts that variants were emerging from folk anecdotes and from a novelistic type of folktale. In actual fact, the subjects of the majority of the variants have been derived from the novelistic type of folktale. With regard

to age, similar folktales in a majority of cases are much older than the variants.” [Berkov 1977: 10]

The history of the storyline that we are interested in reveals that in fact it is older than the seventeenth-century instance. By turning his attention to this old Polish variant, Julian Krzyżanowski expressed the supposition that it dates back to the well-known folktale about the flea and the fly (ATU 282A). [Krzyżanowski 1960: 212] Let us examine it more closely.

The tale of the flea and the fly was entered into the Aarne-Thompson [now Aarne-Thompson-Uther] tale-type index on the basis of the Polish and Russian variants. It was formulated in the following way: “Flea and Fly. Things were not good for the flea in the country nor for the fly in the city, so they changed places.” In the index of N. P. Andreev, where the subject is given a place under number *284, [Andreev 1929] there is a single variant, which belongs to virtually the best Russian teller of folktales, Abram Novopoltsev. The flea leaves the city and goes to the countryside, and the fly vice versa. In the summer the peasants become tired and smash the fleas, but in a gentleman’s bed everything is fine. Meanwhile the fly complains that in the city there is nothing to eat, whereas in the country there are many people, both old and small, so that there always is something to eat. [Sadovnikov 1884: No. 57]

We will note another variant, which was transcribed in the beginning of the twentieth century in the Kadnikov district of the province of Vologda. This variant, on the whole, has the same content: feather beds lure a flea into a city. [Imperatorskoe. . ., 1903: 205]

What can possibly be said about these two Russian texts? There is a fly, but no soup. Let us continue further. A comparative index of East-Slavic folktales presents information about eight Ukrainian variants and one Belorussian variant. [Barag, 1979: No. 282 A*] Among the Ukrainian tales, half are about the flea and the fly; half the tales have the same opposition of the city and countryside, more precisely with an acknowledgement of the relativity of the virtues of country and city life. Here a typically anecdotal situation is created—not with an antithesis of clever and stupid characters, but with simpletons behaving foolishly. Although classified as an animal tale, this anecdote with animal characters in a comic light describes human society. The flea and the fly, to a considerable degree, are indistinct characters since they do not conform to the features of characters within the typology of folktales about animals, but they are unconditionally humorous, at least by virtue of their insignificance.

Insofar as the flea and fly in this story belong to the category of indistinct simpletons, they can be substituted for each other, and there are indeed stories about two flies or two fleas. Sometimes they receive supplementary characteristics: country and city flies appear in two Ukrainian variants, and in a third there are Polish gentleman and peasant fleas. A social nuance, as we see, was also not alien to the basic version, which is noted in the index: the flea departed for the city to luxuriate in a gentleman’s bed.

Behind these social accents and the comic glorification of the delights of city and country life, the soup, into which the fly falls, has somehow been forgotten.

Where is the thread that links the anecdote about people of various nationalities and the animal tale about the flea and the fly? Here is that thread. In one Ukrainian folktale the rural fly says, that in the village they throw you out of the bowl directly with the food. In the city first they will suck on you and then throw you on the ground. [Berezovskii, 1976: no. 477] Therefore it's better in the city; they treat you more considerately there—the same antithesis of city and countryside, but with a new “soup” element.

Different accents appear in a Belorussian variant, which was recorded in Poland. [Federowski, 1903: no. 392] A flea crawls out of (Southern) Poland, and a fly flies out of Prussia. Things were bad for the flea in Poland: the Masurians would burn the straw, where the flea lives, but among the Germans it may expect great-grandchildren. And things were bad for the fly among the Germans: a Prussian catches you, sucks on you, and throws you out. A Masurian, on the contrary, throws the fly out together with the food. A close variant has been recorded in Lithuania—only with two flies, flying from famished Lithuania to Prussia, but their expectations are disappointed: the Prussian licks the fly, which had fallen in the food. [Uther, 1992: no. 33]

Among the six Polish variants five are about the flea and the fly. Almost everywhere the fly praises the country, because a peasant throws the fly that had fallen into the food directly on the floor, whereas the city dweller first of all sucks on it diligently. This gesture, in which not a drop of food should be lost, is so important in Polish folktales, that Julian Krzyżanowski includes it in his formulation as type 299 [ATU Type 282A] with this description: “The urban flea and the rural fly are boasting: the first praises the city, where people do not wear underwear, and the second praises the countryside because a peasant diligently will throw a fly on the floor with the food, but a city person first diligently sucks on the fly.” [Krzyżanowski, 1962]

A review of Slavic folktale variants about the flea and the fly show that the majority of them are connected with the opposition of the city to the countryside. This is where the motif of the fly falling in soup also appears. However, this motif is disappearing in Russian folktales, so that Poland, where it has persisted, can be considered its homeland. In that Polish territory, as well as among Belorussians and Lithuanians, a new motif emerges: the contrast is not between the city and the countryside, but between a German and a Pole (or Lithuanian). And this development directly leads to the Polish variant and the Russian anecdote introduced at the outset of this essay.

The preceding findings compel one to think about a Slavic, or more precisely, Polish origin for this storyline. However, this is not the case: it is not known only among the Slavs and does not occur only in the oral tradition. The literary version of this storyline is much older and its history can be traced from the ninth century. A fable writer from the circle of Pavel Diakon [an 8th century Benedictine monk and chronicler associated with Monte Cassino] has a tale about the flea and the gout. (2) A long, long time ago the flea was ordered to bite only the rich, but the gout was to attack only the poor. It went badly for both until they

exchanged places. Since then the gout has accompanied the rich, but the flea lives among the poor. [Perry, 1952: no. 57]

Pavel Diakon turns to the traditional models of folktale and mythology by moving the action to some immemorial time when everything could still change—to the time of creation. The experiment with the flea and the gout was completed successfully: “since then” everything has gone just as it is. Clearly, this composition is presented here as a joke and the etiology customary for a myth is comic insofar as the story brings together “characters” that are incongruous—gout and a flea.

The Latin fable of the Middle Ages became a part of the tradition of European fables. The humorous etiology disappeared in this storyline and the flea gave way to the spider. The spider had things badly in a rich urban home, where they were always sweeping out spider webs, but it was worse for the gout in a peasant's home. This version became established in the fables of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and occurred in the sermon as an exemplum of the eternal dissatisfaction of a people with what they have. [Tubach, 1969: no. 204] We encounter this version also in the collection of comic tales of Hans Sachs (1545) as a humorous example, the meaning of which approximately corresponds to the proverb, “A fish seeks where it is deeper, but a person where it is better.” [Sachs, 1959: 127] Sachs adheres to the principles of the ancient chivalric lyric: in his work Spider and Gout carry on a dispute about where it is better to live, boasting about their forefathers and proud of their nobility—for Spider once was Arachna and, according to Ovid, infuriated Athena, but Gout was friendly with Bacchus. Sachs hastened to warn the city dwellers about the harm of over-indulgence, which leads to gout. Thus the Meistersinger from Nuremberg introduces a well-known subject into the poetry of the northern Renaissance.

Finally Jean de La Fontaine turns to this storyline (III, 8), paving the way for its entrance into the fable tradition of Modern Times. Here the Devil appears and suggests that Spider and Gout choose a convenient place to live. Spider chooses a palace; Gout chooses a shack because it feared doctors. However, the poor peasant, despite his ailment, chops the firewood, hoes the field and in general performs a peasant's work, thus causing Gout much torment. Then Spider and Gout meet again—and exchange places.

Vasilii Trediakovskii (who for some reason attributed this story to “Aesop's fables”) and Dimitri Khvostov rendered LaFontaine's version into Russian, but it received its widest fame among Russian readers thanks to Ivan Krylov (V, 16). Without on the whole departing from the original or adorning the narrative with details from Russian everyday life as he usually did, Krylov did not relinquish his manner of dialog with a reader by referring to La Fontaine (“La Fontaine spread this rumor about the world”) and noting his passion for humorous aphorisms (“Для доброго отца большие дети бремя, пока они не по местам” / “For a good father grownup children are a burden until they are settled”). The notion of the irrepressibility of the human heart has been colored by irony in the works of the fable writers: one pursues various schemes while considering circumstances, but is unable to foresee anything clearly—life thwarts calculations. There also is

a social emphasis here: a peasant lives in filth, but His Excellency suffers even in the most splendid home—life is far from perfection.

The connection of the fable tradition with the folktale category of animal tales does not require any proofs. However, a fable often “straightens out” the storylines of folktales by emphasizing a moral (although a comic coloring of this moral—which from the start characterized the animal folktale—is preserved). Yet in folktales the moral is optional, whereas in fables it is obligatory: here it is necessary “to tell the world,” even if it is of no benefit. The edification, however, inevitably makes the narrative texture cruder, since it strives for a moral lesson. For these reasons, the characters in the fables can become marionettes of virtue or sin, bearers of the characteristic of human character. This also has occurred in our storyline: here the incorporeal Gout has appeared, a character nonexistent in folklore. The flea, which is “unsuitable” for the fable, has been replaced by Spider, whose role in the fable had already taken shape. Nevertheless, from Pavel Diakon to Ivan Krylov, the range of meanings is sufficiently wide: from mockery of the pretensions of insignificant creatures to thoughts about the insatiableness of the human heart.

In the folktale the flea and the fly play roles because they are more familiar in the everyday life of the peasants and lower class. However, here there is no simple moral, but one that results from the antithesis of city and country life. The motif of the fly falling into the soup was, judging by everything, worked up in Poland. In the next stage in the development of this storyline, the fly falls in the soup not in a city or the countryside, but into the soup of people of various nationalities. In the folktale about a flea and fly this involves the customary pair “ours—some other’s”; moreover, the “other,” in the role of which a German invariably appears, is presented comically, as a caricature of pedantry and exactitude verging on greed. Finally the last step: this thrifty gentleman turns out to be among a group of people similar to himself who have likewise become victims of the situation with the fly. Such examples occur in the Polish instances of the seventeenth century and in the Russian anecdote of the twentieth century. In this respect the comic light is shed on all human society, insofar as the traditional pair is replaced by a crowd of people and the humorous side of each is revealed. All this represents “the increase in meaning,” which we mentioned in the beginning.

This is one pole in the development of the storyline of an ancient anecdote. The other pole is the acute narrowing of meaning to the point of being proverbial. There is a Polish proverb: “U Niemców i mucha się nie pożywi” [“Even a fly starves among Germans”]. [Krzyżanowski and Adalberg, 1970: 605] An old anecdote is reduced to a proverb so that everything becomes clear. It would seem that the meaning of the proverb is so simple, that there is no question about any other explanation of it. Nevertheless, this is not so. Krzyżanowski recalls how during the First World War fate carried him away to distant Kurgan, and there in Siberia he somehow managed to talk about all this with a well-known lawyer. Krzyżanowski wanted to go home to Poland, but the lawyer suggested he should remain in Siberia: there, in Europe, everything was so cramped, that it was

necessary to force one's way into life with one's elbows. There, as with the Germans, even a fly would not enjoy life, while here in Siberia there was plenty of space. [Krzyżanowski, 1960: 212] Thus in the simplest proverb, as though in a mirror, a fundamental quality of an artistic text was reflected—its ability to pass beyond the limits of the apparent meaning, to become symbolic, and to correspond to the most varied situations in life.

NOTES

1 Evgenii Kostiukhin (1938-2006) published this essay in *Tradycja i inwencja. Wątki i motywy obiegowe w dawnych literaturach słowiańskich*, ed. Eliza Malek. Łódź: Katedra Literatury i Kultury Rosyjskiej Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1999, pp. 83-89. Marina Kostiukhina, Evgenii's widow, requested James Bailey's translation. For detailed information about Kostiukhin's life, education, publications, and scholarly positions (especially in the Pushkinskii Dom in Saint Petersburg), see James Bailey and Faith Wigzell's translation of Tatyana G. Ivanova, "In Memory of Evgenii Alekseevich Kostiukhin," *Folklorica*, volume XI, 2006. As will be evident, Kostiukhin's use of the term "anecdote" throughout this essay is not only the equivalent of a narrative joke or jocular tale, but also conforms to the prevailing classificatory terminology of Russian folklorists; see Victor A. Pogadaev, "The Origin and Classification of Russian Anecdotes as a Folklore Genre," *ICAF 2009: International Conference on Asian Folklore*, ed. Mahāwitthayālai Sinlapākṇ and Khana 'Aksṇrasāt. Bangkok, Thailand: Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 2009.

2 The definite article is used because gout is personified in the tale.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andreev, N. P. 1929. Андреев, Н. П. *Указатель сказочных сюжетов по системе Аарне* [Index of Folktale Motifs in the System of Aarne]. Ленинград: Издание Государственного Русского географического общества.
- Berezovskii, I. P., ed. 1976. Березовский И.П. *Казки про тварин* [Tales about Animals] Київ: Наукова думка.
- Berkov, P. N. 1977. Берков, П. Н. *История русской комедии XVIII в.* [Sources of the Russian Comedy in the 18th Century]. Ленинград: Изд-во "Наука" Ленингр. отделение.
- Federowski, M. 1903. *Lud białoruski na Rusi Litewskiej* [The Belarussian People in Russian Lithuania] T.3. Kraków: nakładem Akademii Umiejętności.
- Imperatorskoe russkoe geograficheskoe obshchestvo – Otdelenie etnografii. *Zhivaia Starina* 1-2, 1903. 205.
- Krzyżanowski, J. 1960. *Mądrzej głowie dość dwie słowie* [A Word to the Wise is Sufficient]. Vol. 2. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

- _____. 1962. *Polska bajka ludowa w układzie systematycznym* [Systematizing the Polish Folk Tale]. Vol. 1. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Krzyżanowski, J. and Adalberg, Samuel, eds. 1970. *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażeń przysłowiowych polskich* [The New Book of Polish Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings]. T.2. Warszawa : Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Perry, B. E. 1952. *Aesopica*. Vol. 1. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sachs, Hans. 1959. Сакс, Ганс. *Избранное* [Selected Works]. Москва Ленинград: Гос. Изд. художественной литературы.
- Sadovnikov, D. N. 1884. Садовников, Д. Н. *Сказки и предания Самарского края* [Tales and Legends of the Samara region]. Санкт Петербург: Тип. Мин-ва внутр. дел.
- Barag, L. G., et. al. 1979. Багаб Л. Г. и др. *Сравнительный указатель сюжетов, восточно-славянская сказка* [Comparative Index of Motifs, East Slavic Tales] Ленинград: Наука, Ленингр. отд-ние.
- Tubach, F. C. 1969. *Index Exemplorum. A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- Uther, Hans-Jörg. 1992. *Märchen aus dem Baltikum* [Fairy Tales from the Baltics]. Wien Buchgemeinschaft Donauland.