

## PROBLEMS OF CATEGORIES IN FOLK PROSE\*

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In 1938, in a work of his later years, the great Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga--who might be considered the spiritual successor of Jakob Burckhardt--declared that play has as important a function as work in human activity. He contrasted his cultural and sociological conception of **homo ludens** [Man the Player] to the optimistic eighteenth-century fiction of **homo sapiens** and the positivistic nineteenth-century label, **homo faber** [Man the Maker].<sup>1</sup> Huizinga is of the opinion that all human culture has arisen--or unfolded itself--in play and as play. Play, states Huizinga, is older than culture; for as insufficient and limited as the concept of culture may be, its definition presupposes a human society in every case--and animals have clearly not waited for humans to teach them about play. We can safely say that human civilization has added no distinguishing characteristics to the universal concept of play. Animals play exactly as people do.

Thus, play presents us with a totality, a "primary category of life"--if there is anything at all which deserves this title. However, those who focus (as Huizinga does in a wider sense) directly on the function of

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play--not only in the lives of animals and children, but also in its expression in culture--have the right to begin their studies at the point where biology and psychology leave off. They find that play in culture is an entity which pre-exists culture itself, which has accompanied culture and intermingled with it from its beginnings to the present day.

Huizinga further states that all the great primal activities of human society are interwoven with play. Consider language, the first and greatest tool which people themselves have fashioned in order to communicate, to teach, to give orders. Through language, people make distinctions, define, determine--in short, **name**; in language, things are exalted to the realm of the spiritual. The spirit which creates language springs playfully again and again beyond the concrete world to the world of thought. Behind every single abstract expression stands a metaphor, and in each metaphor a play-on-words lies embedded. Thus, in devising terms which describe its own existence, humanity continually creates for itself a second, invented world alongside the world of nature.

Or consider myth, which is also a symbolic representation of existence, though on a slightly more abstract level than individual words are. Through myth early peoples sought to explain the earthly and to form connections with the heavenly. In each of the ever-changing fantasies in which myth clothes the everyday world, an inventive spirit plays on the border between humor and high seriousness. Finally, consider religious cults: primitive communities carry out their holy activities for guaranteeing the well-being of the world--their consecrations, sacrifices, mysteries of ritual--as **play**, in

the truest sense of the word. The great driving forces of cultural life--law and order, commerce, finance, arts and crafts, poetry, scholarship, and science--have their roots in myth and ritual. All these roots, as well, were nursed in the soil of playful activity.

At this point, we can leave Huizinga. Perhaps we will feel moved to restrict his general conceptions (which he applied freely to almost every area of human culture) to a more workable range. For instance, in many of the above-mentioned definitions which deal with the genesis of linguistic and mythic images, the nature of play vanishes into the element of the playful; that is, into an area of activity nearly identical to the spiritual process. In other words, in determining the creative processes at work in the realm of the human spirit, the concept of the playful (which Huizinga uses quite loosely) is only a metaphor, a borrowing from the ontology of play, but scarcely identical with it. Playful actions precede play: the former is an innate power, the latter its product.

I do propose, however, that we further pursue Huizinga's attempt to reduce our culture to a few basic functions. With this in mind, I call attention to the equally useful attempt of the German philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner to define laughing and crying as the shaping forces for all imaginative growth.<sup>2</sup> We should continue and expand such efforts by attempting to understand the primal reality of human storytelling--as a genuinely creative quality similar to those which motivate human culture in general. And I believe that we can use a similar methodological starting point, if we first set human narrative in relief from the pre-cultural, "animal" level of development. Naturally, we know through modern behavioral studies that in the social life of the more

highly developed animal species, the need for communication has led to the development of basic languages. But this instinctively created speech evokes no spiritually inspired conceptions or even conceptual categories in the minds of its hearers; it merely stimulates behavioral reactions, instinctively and irrevocably. In his famous book, **Verständigung unter Tieren** [Understanding among Animals], the German behaviorist Konrad Lorenz has shown that bird species sometimes possess their own speech.<sup>3</sup> Just as bees use their sign language to communicate such things as the location of food to their companions, birds communicate with their kind through sound signals which transmit, among other things, information about the location of food. But something quite different is happening when we hear this sort of complicated conversation among crows:

The first says, "There's a horse behind this mountain!"  
 The second responds, "Is there any meat on it?"  
 A third maintains, "Only skin and bones!"<sup>4</sup>

This charming aetiological tale on the origin of crow language, known in Germany as well as among other European folk, is an invention of Man the Storyteller, who substitutes his own emotional and mental make-up for that of the animals. And with this example, we have now arrived at Man the Storyteller, **homo narrans**.

At the same time, I believe, we have come upon a central theme in the research of cultural and intellectual history. For we can certainly assume that human beings--since they produced their first tools and ornaments, or developed their first simple forms of cult and magic (death cults, sacrificial cults, cults of masks, hunting magic, protective magic, and so on); since they first understood how to express their ingenuity through

the artistic production of sculpture, engraving, and painting; since they first created gods and demons--that from the earliest days of their spiritual existence, human beings have given play to their emotions and conceptions through the narration of stories of all sorts. They told narratives which gave form to their terror and anxiety as well as to the things which fascinated them; narratives which embodied their longing for some measure of happiness, celebrated their heroes, expressed their laughter at events which amused them, aired their complaints over the fickleness of their world; narratives in which they imagined the gods and the frightening powers which lurked around and within them; narratives in which, in short, early people came to terms with everything which affected them.

We know nothing about these ancient storytelling processes: no ornament, no picture, no building created in these early epochs expresses anything about storytelling and its contents and background. But how could it be that these people who expressed their thoughts and feelings in pictorial and plastic forms--indeed, in forms which even today continue to amaze us--should not also have given shape to their thoughts and feelings in words as well? Nothing speaks against this assumption; everything speaks in its favor. Consider the astonishing fact that, immediately with the onset of written culture, the earliest literary documents were replete with narratives of every sort.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Sumerians and Akkadians of the third to second millennium before Christ gave us the **Gilgamesh** epic, in which numerous archaic types and genres were combined: the creation myth, the legend of the flood, the heroic epic of the journey to the underworld, the casuistic motif of the broken oath,

the aetiology of the bird "kappi," the witch tale concerning Ishtar, and so forth. Also from Mesopotamia came certain certain Etana legends [see AT 313B, 537], the fable of the fox on trial, the argument between the horse and the ox. In the second millennium B.C., the Egyptians knew the Märchen of the Two Brothers [AT 318], the fable of the fight between the parts of the body, the humorous tale of the world turned upside down, the historical legend of the conquest of the city of Joppe (with the famous Alibaba motif), as well as a great number of gnomes [**Weisheitsregeln**] and sayings which may be considered the predecessors of the biblical proverbs of Solomon. Among the Chinese, one thousand years before Christ, appears the first version of the noble legend [**Gentilsage**] of the hero who is abandoned as an infant and raised by animals, as well as the origin myth of the World Egg. In the same area, about 600 B.C., the beautiful Märchen of the swan maidens [AT 400] appears; followed, about 300 B.C., by the aetiological tale of the Woman in the Moon [Motif A751.8]. In their depictions of the dragon fight [AT 300] and the journey of the argonauts, Minoan seals of the second millennium attest that these narratives were already in existence at that time. Homer and Herodotus are both filled with full-length Märchen, legends, and tales of lying (Lügend geschichten). Already in the seventh century B.C., Greek vases show illustrations from the **Odyssey** (for example, the Polyphemous legend, including certain versions of this story which are independent of Homeric tradition<sup>6</sup>) and such animal tales as the race between the hare and the tortoise [AT 275A]. Attic comedies of the fifth century B.C. show knowledge of fables about the Land of Cockaigne [AT 1930; Motif X1503].

Most of these categories of folk narra-

tive are also known in ancient Hebrew tradition. The tripartite legend of the three sons of Noah parallels the Greek traditions of the sons of Kronos and Herakles and the Germanic tradition of the sons of Mannus. The exposure of the child destined for great majesty [Motif R131], a *motif* in many heroic legends, was reported not only of Moses, but also in the more ancient Babylonian tradition of Sargon I--and later told in Persia about Cyrus, in India about Karma, In Rome about Romulus and Remus, and among the Germanic tribes about Sigurd. The destruction of Sodom is nothing more than an aetiological legend. The miracle of Aaron's rod [Motif D441.7.1] also occurs in numerous early Eurasian religious legends. The motif of the parting of the waters [Motif D1551], which belongs to the category of legends of destruction, had already appeared in **Zendavesta**. The miracle by which Moses makes water flow from a rock [motif D1567.6], a narrative which lies along the border between myth and religious legend, is also told of Dionysus, Atalanta, Mithras, Jesus, and the saints of all religions. Casuistic problem tales are represented by the famous story of the Judgement of Solomon [AT 926], which apparently possesses older parallels in Indic tradition, and is also depicted on a fresco in Pompey.

Thus did human beings in their early writings set down their thoughts and feelings, their meditations on their world, their surroundings, and their concept of nothingness [**Unwelt**]-through the agency of all sorts of stories. And we may certainly assume that this gift of narration, as well as of narrative form, was not first inspired by the development of writing: storytelling must have existed a long time before then. Here, of course, I am speaking of Märchen and Sagen, of myths and fables, of Schwänke and par-

ables, of religious and aetiological legends. Undoubtedly, this classificatory terminology was entirely unknown to the people of these early epochs, just as it was obscure to their descendents. It is the definition of these categories--not the categories themselves--which are an invention of the science of our time. Of course, Man the Narrator also differentiates between the genres which we call legend, Märchen, and so on. After all, he created these stories. But his names for them are so variable (even on the surface level of language) and his definitions (insofar as he even tries to make them) so inaccurate, that the scholar concerned primarily with binding terms and definitions will not find them of much use. "But," as the Leningrad folklorist Propp states, "in every science, classification is the foundation and prerequisite for the study of the material. Classification itself is the result of a long detailed investigation. The determination of the subject under study very often requires that it be accurately assigned to an appropriate class, genre, or type."<sup>7</sup> Then follows a sentence by Propp which cannot go uncontested: "In folklore, the painstaking preliminary work in this field has still not been completed."

As is well known, the Brothers Grimm made a few, early general statements--still valid today--concerning the difference between the legend and the Märchen, thus helping to distinguish the generic characteristics of these forms. In subsequent times, such efforts multiplied, and in the early decades of this century, ever more complex categories have been established, and suitable definitions have been worked out. Berendsohn, Wesselski, von Sydow, and Jolles can be named as spokesmen for this field of investigation, as well as Lüthi, Röhrich, Bødker, Propp, Čistov, and others in more

recent years. The problem has been approached from all angles. Stylistic, structural, and phenomenological criteria, as well as qualitative and quantitative considerations, and the biological and esthetic functions of these categories have been brought into play to determine their distinctive natures. Here, however, arises the basically simple question of the priority and causality of things. Only primary and constant data can be considered crucial in determining the binding characteristics of genres. From the beginning, we must discard incidental details limited to certain times and places, as well as fluctuating esthetic, cultural, social, and other such functions. The point of departure for such definitions, however, can only be sought at the core of the phenomenon; namely, at the place where the expression and form of these genres originate: with Man the Narrator himself.

Will-Erich Peuckert, the famous German cultural scientist, once said in regard to the topic at hand, that everyone who tells a story wishes to express something which is full of significance and meaning for himself.<sup>8</sup> This is exactly the point at which all observations on the meaning and nature of narrative categories must begin. Naturally, the **Einfache Formen** [simple forms] of folk narration can be differentiated by various stylistic and structural characteristics; however, above all and **ex genere**, it is the essential and dominant expressions inherent in each of these forms which causes their permutations of style and shape. As I stated earlier, at the 1959 Congress of Folk Narrative Research at Kiel: behind all the various and uniquely expressive facets of our narrative heritage there exist the internal drives and conscious will of humanity--humanity provides the only impetus for expression here.<sup>9</sup> In my various

attempts to determine these basic categories, I have gotten the impression that all too often and all too readily, folklorists study the materials and their independent existence to the exclusion of **people**--the people who created them and gave them their appearance and their form. Therefore, I repeat emphatically, once again, that all form and structure is merely the hallmark of the individual creation. All variations in form are only the ephemeral and varied expression of an absolute content.

K.V. Ćistov has condemned such attempts to reduce narrative forms to intellectual and spiritual absolutes. He has labeled such attempts as "abstract-psychological" and "neo-romantic" in nature, and he has spoken sarcastically of the "dreaded" drives behind narration.<sup>10</sup> I think it very remarkable, especially from the standpoint of scientific theory, that it should be a Russian--of all people--who would leave so little room to the fundamental psychic and mental powers of the human creative process. Apparently the materialistically-oriented view of the world has little tolerance for arguments based on psychology. And, by the way, I also believe that we should not be too hasty to devalue the idea of the "romantic." For surely the Romantics, though sometimes somewhat intuitive, taught us more about the essence of the things which concern us than we have learned from the mechanistic methods of modern times--and here, I am by no means referring only to the current rage for structuralism.

Thus, in spite of what Ćistov's counter-arguments might be, I believe we can proceed from the idea that the narration of stories of all sorts arises from one of the most basic needs of human nature. I believe we may further proceed from the assumption that

the individual genres of folk narrative are primary forms of human expression, which have sprung up from dreams and emotions, from magical and rational thought processes, from delight in play and fantasy. Then, as the corollary to these two assumptions, we may conceive of each of these genres as spontaneous expressions revealing the special relationship of humans to the world around and within them, at any given time. If these premises are accepted, we must also accept that each of these genres has its own function: that is, its own expressive function and its own power to produce a certain effect. When we consider such factors in connection with the great age and the universal distribution of these categories of folk prose, the **Einfache Formen** prove themselves to be an anthropological, perhaps even a purely anthropological, problem.

Čistov also argues against this point, using my own terminology against me: "this is not a question of an 'anthropological' problem, but of an 'historical,' 'social,' and 'ethnological' problem."<sup>11</sup> In my view, however, the "historical" as well as the "ethnological" (by which Čistov probably means "ethnic-regional") fall under the category of "incidental details" mentioned above. These details are certainly of great significance as partial and marginal manifestations of the total phenomenon and are therefore absolutely worthy of study. Nevertheless, as partial forces bounded by space and time, these variables cannot be considered useful tools for determining genres. I think rather that we should probe deeper beneath the veneer of things, behind these obvious historic, social, and ethnic variables to seek their common denominator--the primal base of these phenomena, the ontological kernel of genre substances. This kernel can only be

found, however, in the realm of anthropology.

In order to clarify this position, I will repeat once more what I stated in my 1959 address at Kiel:

It seems to me that in attempting to delineate **Einfache Formen**, we have worked much too much with questions of cultural influence and borrowing, that we have thought too much in European and Indo-European terms, that we have lost sight of the insights of anthropological science in treating the fundamental questions of the nature, type, origin, and distribution of narrative genres. By this, I mean that the problem of the **Einfache Formen** is an anthropological problem. How else to account for the global distribution of most of these forms? No spirit can inspire, where there is no sympathy; no form can grow, where the readiness is lacking. What can change, perhaps, are the specific images of a basic intellectual and emotional content (which remains always and everywhere the same). Perhaps the degree of a culture's predisposition to accept such forms, or the poetic experience with which the forms are rendered, may also change. What remains the same, always and everywhere, is the functionality of the expression and its forms. We must therefore expand our concept of the **Einfache Formen** (many of which have been defined too narrowly, according to methods of Western literary criticism) in order to encompass their universal, human expressive functions and the laws which underlie those functions. These questions are not really historically or regionally limited. They are purely anthropological. These elemental expressions are intrinsic characteristics of the soul and mind, and are thus essential to the universal human creativity of epic form.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that my meaning is clear. I

also believe that the implications relevant to the definition of categories are clear as well. For this task, we can only begin with people themselves, with the heritage of thought and emotion which they--in various ways and in various forms--have invested in their narratives. The question of terminology--that is, how these genres and subgenres should be named--is secondary and easy to solve.

It is surely not the task of an introductory address to resolve the definitional problems indicated here. Elsewhere, I have already tried in various ways to establish an initial, and certainly an incomplete, set of guidelines for such a study. Here, I would like to point out once again that, though many of our colleagues have already taken stands on this question, we have still not arrived at clear and internationally applicable results. It has also been said that all generic distinctions made with an "ideal type" in mind are inadequate and run the risk of being overly abstract, completely unrepresentative of reality. But is this true? After all, these things exist! All these things are real: the Märchen, the legend, the Schwank, the religious legend, the aetiology, the memorate, and so on. Those researchers who spend--as most of us have spent--a lifetime dealing with these simple or complex forms of folk creation certainly know, however, that the sum of those pure forms which actually exist must of necessity be concentrated into the appropriate genres. Naturally there are transitional and mixed forms: there are Märchenschwänke and Schwanklegends. Animal tales appear sometimes as fables, sometimes as aetiological tales, sometimes as Schwänke, and as many other genres as well. Through a misunderstanding of their meaning, the parables of one folk group devolve into the Schwänke of another. Legends--in the course

of their wanderings, when a somewhat different ethnic group no longer understands or tolerates their original demonic character--can become Märchen. "This is as self-evident as the mixture of lyric and epic modes, or of epic and dramatic modes," Max Lüthi once stated very clearly. "There are lyric and epic dramas, but the ideas of the dramatic, the lyric, the epic, are nevertheless separable from each other, not only in the speculations of poetic theorists, but also in the experience of those who create and enjoy these expressions. Nothing which lives is rigidly schematic, yet every living thing strives after a definite form. No individual narrative will rigidly fulfill all the laws of the genre, but many narratives draw close to the strict absolute form and play around its borders."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, pure forms do exist. What remains doubtful is only whether their scientific definitions can stand up to objective criticism. Are such definitions binding for the entire global range of our narrative tradition, or only perhaps for the narratives told in Eurasia, or in even smaller ethnic regions? Are they valid only for certain eras of cultural development, or only within certain mental or social strata? Or are such criteria merely an individual affair? Please understand me well: these are merely questions, and no historical, social, or ethnological typology can be derived from them. It seems to me--and I intentionally repeat myself one more time--that the scepticism with which our theoreticians approach their own conceptual viewpoints and their own flair for definitions results from a false principle. Scholars focus on the surface manifestations of form, structure, stylistic characteristics, social surroundings, and other such incidental details--instead of beginning with the creator of all these

phenomena, the one who stands behind all these things. We must begin with Man the Narrator, whose special gift it is to give appropriate and suitable narrative expression to his unconscious impulses and conscious imaginings.

Please understand me well: as I see him, this Man the Narrator, who has been introduced to you with a few short words, is neither the individual who makes up certain stories nor the individual narrator who passes them on. Naturally, we know all about the role of the individual in genetic as well as in traditional processes. But what I mean here by **homo narrans** is nothing more than the sum of all storytelling and tradition-bearing people. **Homo narrans** is, at one and the same time, the representative of humanity, the representative of humanity's wishes, dreams, and anxieties--and the representative of these thoughts and feelings as they are fictionalized and heightened into their appropriate narrative forms. This **homo narrans** is truly an anthropological--not a regional or an individual--problem, just as the forms and the motivating spiritual and intellectual impulses of his narratives are anthropological problems. Like **homo ludens**, **homo narrans** is directly involved in the great creative processes of the human spirit. The effect of his creative use of the **Einfache Formen** can be felt in even the most subtle, refined, creative forms of our civilization. The best aspects of all arts--poetry, painting, music--are grounded in those forms which **homo narrans** first invented--or should we say, which were invented in him? Here the ontological-functional approach to the problem ends in metaphysics--a topic which is not within the scope of this essay. My simple intent was only to point out possible starting points for defining the **Einfache Formen** of our narrative tradition--

that is, to show how *homo narrans* gives form in language not only to the surface level of his thoughts, but also to what is deepest and most basic in him.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Hamburg, 1956) [English translation: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) trans. note].

2 Helmuth Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen: Eine Untersuchung Nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (München, 1950) [English translation: *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970) trans. note].

3 Konrad Lorenz, *Verständigung unter Tieren* (Zürich: Fontana Verlag, 1953).

4 See, for example Richard Wossidlo, *Mecklenburgische Volksüberlieferungen* vol. 2: *Die Tiere im Munde des Volkes* (Wismar, 1899), p. 110ff., no. 745ff., and the notes on these numbers, p. 384. [When rendered by Mecklenburg narrators, this passage is onomatopoeic: the words of the crows are made to sound like cawing. trans. note].

5 The following evidence is summarized from Kurt Ranke, "Einfache Formen," in *Das Fischer Lexikon Literature 2*, 1 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1965), p. 187ff.

6 On this point see Lutz Röhrich, "Die mittelalterlichen Redaktionen des Polyphem-Märchens (AT 1137) und ihr Verhältnis zur ausserhomerischen Tradition," *Fabula* 5(1962): 48ff.

7 V.J. Propp, "Principy klassifikacii fol'klornyx žanrov," *Sovetskaja Ėtnografija* (1964): no. 4, pp. 147-154.

8 Will-Erich Peuckert, *Deutsches Volkstum in Märchen und Sage, Schwank and Rätsel* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,

1938), p. 19.

**9** Kurt Ranke, "Einfache Formen," in **Internationaler Kongress der Volkserzählforscher in Kiel und Kopenhagen** (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1961), 1ff. [English translation by William Tempher and Eberhard Alsen in **Journal of the Folklore Institute** 4(1967): 17-31. trans. note].

**10** K.W. Čistov, **Zur Frage der Klassifikationsprinzipien der Prosa-Volksdichtung**. Lecture delivered at the Seventh International Congress of the Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Moscow, 1964; German-language section, (Moscow, 1964), p. 2.

**11** Ibid., p. 6.

**12** See note 9; [This passage appears on pp. 30-31 of the English translation. trans. note].

**13** Max Lüthi, **Das Europäische Volksmärchen** 2nd ed. (Bern und München, 1960), p. 98.

**14** [Translator's note: I would like to thank Tricia Lootens of Indiana University for reading through this manuscript, correcting errors, and suggesting emendations. She is responsible for many of the improvements in the manuscript, but is not responsible for any errors which may remain.