

BELIEF NARRATIVES AND GENRE

Thirty-eight years ago, at the sixth congress of the ISFNR in Helsinki, Rudolf Schenda made the following observations about narrative genres:

“Classifications of genre are of use to the researchers in order to conquer their ideal questions, not to the narrators to conquer their real problems which are verbalized in acts of communication. Theories of genre are alien to social problems [sozialproblemfremd]”.¹

It was, and still is, a challenging remark. However, I would not completely agree because it conflates different levels of discourse and suggests that theories of genre do not contribute much the resolution of social issues. But, let us first consider the context. Schenda made his comments in reaction to papers by Roger Abrahams and Lauri Honko. He remarked that the concept of genre came from literary studies. His main concern was that it petrified narration through rules and this hindered attention to unclassified material such as “pub-talk, everyday-life reports, competing and insulting talk, dream narratives, school adventures, holiday accounts, talking about car accidents and hospital (stays), memories of war, biographies, children boasting on the playground, etc.”

Only when a “socially, analytically viable theory of function” was embraced, would it be possible to counter the accusation of alienation. Such a theory had to be limited to specific circumstances; it had to be “emic” rather than “etic”. Thus, Schenda.

I consider a genre as a rather stable, encompassing category. Such a category may be used, albeit differently, by both narrators and theorists. Designations such as “fairy tale”, “joke”, or “riddle” may be more widely known but “legend” (German: “Sage”) immediately causes difficulties. Moreover, changes occur over time, if only slowly. A student of narratives needs many more categories than the average narrator, if only due to the quantity of material under consideration.

Are belief narratives a separate genre? Schenda did not mention anything that could only vaguely be considered a “belief narrative”, with the exception of dreams (but these tend to be very individualistic). There are severe doubts about the category of “belief narratives”; the main question is whose belief do they refer to? It seems to be an etic (i.e. academic) denomination, but the researcher who determines it does not “believe”. In my opinion, the concept of “belief” is unsuitable for academic purposes, indeed it is often hard to determine whether an informant “believes” in something or not, or is unsure about it, or changes his/her mind in different situations. A “belief” in something may be a topic of analysis (do we study lies?) but it is hard to see it as the delineation of a topic. We may use it as a larger category of narratives, however, and in that sense it could be a (temporary) genre.

Urgent discussion is needed about the subject of the Belief Narrative Network and the present volume should contribute to this. Let me start by briefly clarifying my own stance. When taken separately, the different subjects of “belief narratives” can of course be legitimately studied. This includes, for example, werewolves, witches, ghosts, saints etc. In those cases, however, it would not be very wise to restrict the study to narratives, whether oral or not; everything needs to be considered, scrutinized and analyzed. Narratives do not need to dissolve in other material, but they are juxtaposed by other kinds of texts and actions and incorporated into a bigger frame. The question whether the different people involved

¹ In: *Studia Fennica* 20 (1976), 28.

“believed” in something or not is still significant, but is not a determining element. And overarching “beliefs” (“faiths”) need to be taken into account, too. It is simply not possible to properly understand witches or ghostlights or whatever, without knowing anything about the religion of the people studied. Religions themselves could actually be seen as complex “belief narratives”.

But together? How should we combine witches, saints and the occasional UFO? Schenda put the stress on “emic” on a small scale, which means that we should look for the categories used by our informants and these may not be the same as our own.

It is also problematic if we would ask what is a “belief”, and what is not. Are there any narratives without some sort of “belief”? What should be our focus? Solving these and other problems will take much more than a single volume. But it may be a start.

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