

WOLFGANG MIEDER

*Narratives Across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations. Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (June 21-27, 2009 Athens)*. Ed. by Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki, Evangelos Karamanes, and Ioannis Plemmenos. 3 vols. Athens: Academy of Athens, Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, 2014. Pp. 2039.

What follows is not a book review as such but rather the celebratory comments that I made at the official presentation of these three massive volumes of *Proceedings* on December 17, 2014, at the Academy of Athens in Greece:

Let me start my short remarks by thanking Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki and Evangelos Karamanes of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens for inviting me to participate at the official presentation of the three massive volumes of *Narratives across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations. Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (June 21-27, 2009 Athens)*. They, Ioannis Plemmenos, and many others deserve our admiration and appreciation for editing over 125 articles comprising 2039 exquisitely produced pages of scholarship written by international folklorists. The third volume even includes abstracts of all the papers, the entire program of the unforgettable Congress at Athens, and numerous pages of colored pictures of special events and participants. In one of them I found myself represented, bringing back all those unforgettable memories of one of the most significant meetings ever assembled in the field of international folkloristics. When one considers the sociopolitical and economic challenges that Greece and its people have endured during the past few years, it is somewhat of a miracle that these invaluable volumes were published at all. When the books arrived at my office at the University of Vermont about six weeks ago, I was absolutely overwhelmed by their heftiness and found myself running from office to office in order to show them off to my colleagues. My repeated

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questions to them were simply: "Can you believe this scholarly accomplishment by our Greek colleagues during these hard times? How did they do this and where did they find the funding to accomplish this Herculean labor? Could we possibly have mastered such a giant publication here in the United States?" Very honestly, I have never seen such a gargantuan congress publication, and on behalf of all members of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research and folklorists everywhere, I would like to express our sincere thanks and deep appreciation for these invaluable proceedings.

To us who had the good fortune to travel to beautiful Athens in June of 2009, the content of these books brings back treasured memories of excellent scholarly presentations by renowned folklorists at the end or middle of their careers but also by younger colleagues and students who represent the future of international folklore research. As we proceeded from lecture to lecture in various languages and on topics too large to enumerate, we learned from each other, we shared old and new insights, and we delighted in rekindling old and forming new friendships. There was, of course, also time for socializing and for enjoying unique events with special meals and drinks, all very conducive to advancing knowledge in the multifaceted field of folk narratives. Indeed, the general theme of the congress was well chosen by calling for contributions about "Narratives across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations". Consequently there were close to 300 presentations dealing with the history and future of folk narrative research, the relevance of narratives to modern concerns of ecology and the environment, the importance of narratives for maintaining memory during migration and in the diaspora, narratives as social strategies and as expressions of identity in a changing world, the importance of storytelling and storytellers in old times and today, and, how could it be otherwise, the relevance and innovative use of folk narratives of all kinds in the modern print and electronic media.

This all reminds me of the title *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* that I gave one of my books in 1987. As a motto for my elaborations on how folk narratives are not only traditional, constant, and static but also innovative, changing, and dynamic, perfectly capable of surviving in the modern age in their original form or in adapted mutations, I chose the title of Johann Wolfgang

von Goethe's poem, "Dauer im Wechsel" from 1803 that might best be rendered into English as "Constancy in Change". As the three congress volumes show, folk narrative studies are rightly and properly characterized by such dichotomies as stability and variability, traditional forms and new creations, cultural continuity and discontinuity, and the simultaneity of tradition and innovation. Parallel to the understandable emphasis of tradition in folklore studies, the contemporaneity and modernity of folklore must not be forgotten. Cultural heritage changes and evolves as it is transmitted and adapted across space and time. Especially today in an interconnected globalized world it behooves folklorists to pay attention to the role that folk narratives in the form of fairy tales, legends, tall tales, nursery rhymes, proverbs, etc. play in various modes of communication as people are no longer restricted to a regional space but can travel worldwide, watch television, read the papers, and above all communicate via social media instantaneously with people literally everywhere. And transmissions and adaptations of folk narratives across time and space are part of the modern age, with the three giant volumes of the Congress on Folk Narratives at Athens bearing witness that folk narrative scholars are paying attention to the interplay of tradition and innovation.

It has always been true that folk narrative studies at their best consider diachronic and synchronic aspects and if possible on a comparative and interdisciplinary basis. While thus investigating linguistic and culturally specific phenomena showing local, regional, and national peculiarities, modern scholarship is casting its investigative net wider by comparing narratives of all types from folk tales to proverbs on a continental or even global dimension. By doing so, folkloristics is not necessarily emphasizing differences among people but rather, and perhaps more importantly, stressing the similarities among the inhabitants of the world over time. This in turn leads to the idea of ethics of place that goes beyond the local and encompasses all of humanity throughout the world with a global or universal view of morality. Yes, there are tensions between individualism and collectivism, local and global, particularism and universalism, but scholars from various disciplines, including folklorists, do well in reflecting on ethical principles that tie humanity together into a common network of mutuality in which compassion, empathy, love, and hope might ensure a

world of peace governed by the proverbial golden rule of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us.

All the lectures presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research in 2009 at Athens and the selection of papers now published in the magnificent three volumes of *Narratives across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations* (2014) attest to this all-encompassing worldview. Folklorists from all corners of the world came to Athens to present their research results as an extended family of scholars. But much of this encounter and knowledge would be lost if it were not for the three-volume set of books being presented here this evening. They are a lasting testimony to the fact that the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens served the international community of folklorists extremely well by organizing this marvelous Congress. With this published record in hand, we can, as Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki has stated it in her introduction to this invaluable publication, “look forward to the future of narratological research, free academic discourse and the globalization of universal human values that are today more necessary than ever, to bring about a worldwide sense of peace and brotherhood among peoples.”

Thank you very much – Sas efaristo poli!

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