

CONCEPTUALIZING 'UNFORGIVENESS' (THE NARRATIVE PLOT "GRASS SNAKE IN THE HUT"): MYTHOLOGY, INTERTEXTUALITY, CONTEXTUALIZATION

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The paper deals with the Ukrainian versions of the narrative plot "grass snake in the hut" and its variant "the just grass snake" (ATU 285 and 285A*) that corresponds to the concept of "unforgiveness". Records made in different parts of Ukraine expose the dialectic of folklore tradition that is reflected in polyfunctionality and variability of international parallels of the narrative plot. The fable depicts mythological beliefs about the grass snake as the zoomorphic embodiment of the demonological character appreciated in traditional culture as the home demon-protector and wealth bearer. At the same time the formal stability of the narrative plot allows for semantic alteration and ambivalent thematic positions while its intertextual transformation functions in the context of conceptual models of "collective trauma". From this perspective, we examine the same fable narrated by Bogdan Khmelnytskyi used as a political metaphor illustrating "unforgiveness" and "revenge" and the historical evidence of "collective trauma". The main element of the composition is a dialogue with a stable formulaic character which stresses the continuity of cultural heritage and reflects the mode of cognitive model. The historically accurate text by Khmelnytskyi was recorded in 1656 by a contemporary of the Ukrainian hetman and historian of his wars with Poland and mentioned by Mykola Kostomarov in his novel *Bogdan Khmelnytskyi* (1857). The current contextualization of the concept of "unforgiveness" actualizes the opposition one's own vs. other's and reflects the war situation in Ukraine defined as the "war for identity".

Keywords: Ukrainian folklore narrative, snake symbol, war for identity

Strangers we forgive for much,
But to those close, we withhold all grace.

Nikolai Berdyaev

The past isn't dead. It isn't even past.

William Faulkner

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary anthropocentric paradigm emphasizes the notion of discourse as the actualization of various forms of text, considered from the perspective of mental processes and in relation to extralinguistic factors. Discourse, in this view, operates according to its own “rules of truth” and its own etiquette, shaping a particular “world” of discourse (Kocherhan 2008: 162; Stepanov 1995: 44–45). One form of such discourse is ethnological analysis.

As Jacques Derrida emphasized, “ethnology as a science could only be born when decentering had occurred [...]. This moment is not only a philosophical or scientific moment; it is simultaneously a political, economic, and technical moment. [...] The critique of ethnocentrism is the condition of ethnology. Ethnology, like any science, occupies a place within the element of discourse. [...] The ethnologist, whether he wants to or not, incorporates into his discourse ethnocentric presuppositions” (Derrida 1989; Zubrytska 1996: 463). Thus, ethnology is intrinsically embedded in discourse and cannot be fully detached from ethnocentric modes of perception.

CONCEPT, ETHNOCENTRISM, AND THE LINGUISTIC WORLDVIEW

Closely related to the ethnocentric nature of ethnology is the concept as a category of linguo-philosophy (Zhaivoronok 2007). A concept is understood as the result of combining meaning with personal and ethnic experience, through which an invariant generalized image is formed. The goal of conceptual analysis – which emerges from the methodologies of rationalism and functionalism and employs general scientific procedures such as formalization, idealization, and modeling – is the reconstruction of cognitive mechanisms of individual or collective consciousness that mediate knowledge about objects and internal reflective experience (Selivanova 2006: 7).

Issues related to the complex representation of the ethnic worldview have gained particular relevance in contemporary scholarship, as they directly influence the formation of the conceptual sphere grounded in national and cultural specificity. Anna Wierzbicka's ethnocentric theory, which interprets meaning as a mental entity, is rooted in anthropocentric and ethnocentric paradigms. According to Wierzbicka, the formation of concepts

is determined by “ethnopsychological axioms” that underlie specific “semantic universes” (Wierzbicka 1985, 1991, 1992).

Concepts, as reflections of real or ideal objects, are preserved in national memory and expressed not only in language but also in imagery and material culture. Their content is dynamic: it is constantly enriched as new conceptual features are added in response to the accumulation of cultural knowledge. Unlike abstract notions, concepts are not only cognitively processed but also emotionally experienced; they become objects of sympathy, antipathy, and even conflict. In this sense, a concept functions as a fundamental element of culture within the mental world of the individual (Stepanov 2004).

Only those notions and lexical units that are especially relevant to a given culture undergo conceptualization, becoming components of folklore idiomatics and carriers of cultural memory, eventually acquiring the status of stereotypes. The notion of stereotype as an “image in the human mind” (Lippmann 1961), associated with emotionally charged positive or negative evaluations (Chałasiński 1935), thus appears as a continuation and condensation of the concept.

FOLKLORE DISCOURSE, STEREOTYPE, AND SOCIAL MEMORY

A concept may be verbalized through individual words, idiomatic expressions, or entire texts. In this sense, linguistic texts function as semiotic representations of the worldview and its conceptual systems. As Ivanov and Toporov note, “the model of the world is realized in various forms of human behavior and in the results of such behavior; any such realization is called a text” (Ivanov and Toporov 1988: 7). Accordingly, the conceptual worldview can be understood as a discursive system of notions concerning surrounding realities, embodied through word-signs and word-concepts, where national conceptualization reflects culturally specific modes of perception (Zhaivoronok 2007: 11–15).

The creation of concepts within ethnocultural consciousness is based on idiomatization and oriented toward supra-individual usage. From this perspective, discourse – particularly folklore discourse – can be defined as a text viewed through the prism of events, in which life contexts are modeled as typical situations accompanied by corresponding idiomatic expressions.

The study of folklore idiomatics makes it possible to trace, “from the perspective of ethnic consciousness,” cultural imprints of traditions, customs, rituals, and beliefs (Selivanova 2004: 8). In a broader sense, folklore discourse, encompassing stable models and traditional texts across genres, becomes a “mirror in which a linguocultural community recognizes its national self-awareness,” facilitating the transmission of cultural stereotypes (Teliia 1996: 9).

Ethnolinguistics, which examines the realization of traditional cultural memory in contemporary discourse (Sedakova 2018: 355), analyzes folklore narrative texts through the

prism of stereotypes and concepts of the linguistic worldview (Yudin 2018: 356). The Polish school of cognitive ethnolinguistics emphasizes the semantic interpretation of stereotypes, assuming that linguistic analysis inevitably becomes an analysis of stereotypes (Bartmiński 2005). Stereotypes are typologized according to modality, distinguishing mythological representations from ideological stereotypes (ibid.: 168; Smoljanski 2023: 32). These types often replace one another, since mythological thinking operates through binary oppositions such as “good” versus “bad.”

The process of stereotyping may thus be understood as a form of mythological thinking embedded in the very notion of social reality and social memory. In this context, the concept of tradition as social memory – a repository of stereotypes – resonates with Bronisław Malinowski’s functional understanding of myth. In *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (1927), Malinowski interprets myth as a cultural mechanism that fulfills fundamental human needs. Shaping the future according to patterns of the past represents a form of stereotyped thinking characteristic of mythological consciousness, especially relevant in moments of societal crisis (Temchenko 2024: 600).

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES, CONFLICT, AND DISCURSIVE ASYMMETRY

Jerzy Bartmiński has demonstrated that stereotypes may change under historical pressure while retaining structural stability. According to him, stereotypes preserve a sense of distance and otherness, often accompanied by curiosity or respect, while internal transformations remain concealed at different structural levels (Bartmiński 2005: 277). Of particular importance are ethnic or national stereotypes rooted in the opposition “us – them,” which determines the perception of the Other. Such stereotypes often carry a strong emotional charge, with negative attitudes toward neighboring peoples and conflicts both generating and reinforcing these representations (ibid.: 178–180).

In the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war, the “language of hatred,” described as a weapon available to everyone, plays a crucial role in constructing the “image of the enemy.” Within this model, the “foreign” is equated with the “hostile” and the “bad,” a mechanism explained as deeply rooted in human cognitive behavior (Dubchak 2023: 18–28).

This brings us back to the problem of ethnocentricity of discourse. The opposition between one’s own and the other – one of the most ancient binary oppositions – ultimately reflects the self as a reference point for evaluating others (Benedyktowicz 1998). Within the same conceptual field emerge such categories as fear and hatred, alongside existential notions of longing, sin, atonement, and suffering (Stepanov 2004: 892).

The asymmetry and shifting hierarchy of binary oppositions are conceptualized through Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance*, which highlights the play of differences and the mechanisms through which oppositions are generated. Similar dynamics operate in intertextuality – the interaction and recoding of multiple texts and discourses within a single text (Kristeva 1969).

THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

These theoretical considerations constitute the methodological foundation of the present study. The aim of the article is to examine the folklore text as a model of conceptualization, taking into account the discursive features of traditional narrative plots in Ukrainian folklore.

The object of the study is the process of conceptualization and intertextualization of folkloric models as mechanisms for generalizing historical experience. The subject of analysis is the Ukrainian traditional narrative plot SUS¹ 285 (“a grass snake in the hut”), which is particularly revealing in terms of its integration into the contemporary informational space and its role in reinterpreting the conceptual model of non-forgiveness and punishment.

Presentation of the main material. The folklore narrative (SUS, ATU 285, 285A*), which is the primary focus of this study, was introduced into Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s² discourse as a *basnia* (fable) – a political metaphor encompassing the concepts of *unforgiveness* and *revenge* – and was later employed in Mykola Kostomarov’s historical novel to convey the corresponding historical context, thereby undergoing a double intertextual transformation. Within this process of “recoding,” the core concept acquires semantic clarity: *unforgiveness* and *revenge* arise as a consequence of the violation of an original ethical norm. Justice is grounded in the principle of “retaliation in kind,” one of the oldest legal standards, wherein punishment must correspond to the committed offense according to the *lex talionis* – “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This notion of justice forms the semantic nucleus of the aforementioned concept.

Thus, the intertextual interaction between the folklore narrative and Khmelnytsky’s fable, along with Kostomarov’s novel, highlights the contextual factors underpinning this conceptual model – namely, specific cultural-historical and socio-political realities that determine the interpretation of the traditional plot, actualize its meaning, and define its communicative value.

For the contemporary individual, the folklore text acquires particular significance not only as a treasure of national culture but even more so as the memory of tradition, which verifies the historical experience of the nation and aids in overcoming collective trauma. “It is vitally important to keep in memory, not to forget even the smallest details of existence (whether present or past), for only through such recollection is one able to ‘burn off’ the past, to master it, to diminish its impact on the present. [...] It is memory that liberates

¹ *Comparative Index of Plots. East Slavic Folktale*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1979. The index reflects the plot composition of East Slavic folktales (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian) published in the 18th–20th centuries and is organized according to the Aarne-Thompson classification system.

² Bohdan Khmelnytsky (c. 1595–1657) was a Ukrainian Cossack hetman and military and political leader who headed the Cossack uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1648–1657), leading to the establishment of the Cossack Hetmanate.

us from Time. The most important thing is to recall all the events we have witnessed throughout time," emphasized Mircea Eliade. In his view, "the knowledge of origins reduces to a premonition of primal history, which serves as an example – to the knowledge of myth" (Eliade 1994: 94–95).

Scholars assert that history does not unfold linearly; peaceful periods are often succeeded by conflicts and vice versa, thus bringing to the fore – especially in the context of today's global socio-political transformations – the problems of reconciliation, understanding, and forgiveness (Onyshchenko 2018: 385). The continuity of history can be compared to the spatio-temporal continuum of myth, which disregards chronological time and manifests as continual repetition, particularly in times of crisis. In envisioning the future as a sacred aspiration, one encounters models closely related to the stereotyping of thought characteristic of mythological consciousness. Notably, the Cossack legend is modeled as a Ukrainian national myth, whose relevance in contemporary life continues to grow. It is observed that the Cossack legend "displaced all previous national mythologies and still remains the Ukrainian national myth" (Zarudnyi 2004: 125).

Cultural-symbolic codes, grounded in mythology, reinterpret and recontextualize ancient mythologemes in the framework of current wartime events in this country (Lysiuk 2022: 117). In a meta-historical reinterpretation, the primary algorithm of the mythological model's architectonics consists of folklore techniques such as doubling, tautology, and opposition. Through such reinterpretation – as a construct of sacred and "true" history – the myth appears as a verbalization of "primordial experience," as a "transcendental sensation of the past," wherein the historical matrix is filled with material drawn both from the author's imagination and from legend and folklore (Hrabovych 1991: 38).

In the context of the mentioned theoretical provisions, I consider the traditional Ukrainian folklore narrative, which has nowadays acquired a new, relevant character.

On February 24, 2022, on the first day of the Russian Federation's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, I received a letter from a friend of mine, a fellow Slavist. In addition to many warm words of support and solidarity, the letter read:

Our thoughts are addressed to Ukraine. We follow the news about the fratricidal war, about the bloody conflict between two close Slavic peoples – Ukrainians and Russians with great sorrow and concern. [...] I hope for sanity and that the misfortune that happened will soon be overcome. But hatred will not be overcome. Remember the well-known folk tale: a boy playing near the house suddenly stepped on a snake and it bit him. The child's father managed to cut off the snake's tail with an ax, but it hid in its hole, and the child died. After several years, the boy's father came to the snake's hole and called her to reconcile. "There can be no sincere reconciliation," replied the snake, "as long as you look at your son's grave and I look at my severed tail.

This metaphor initiated our exploration of the narrative plot.

FOLKLORE NARRATIVE

This international folklore narrative plot, which is known in various versions, also lives in the Ukrainian tradition, where it thematizes the concepts of “hate” and “revenge without forgiveness.”

285: The Dead Child | *The Child and the Grass Snake*: The snake drinks from the child's milk-bottle;

285 A: *The Dead Child and the Grass Snake's Tail*: A white snake brings luck to the house. It is fed milk. People kill the snake and then have bad luck (Aarne-Thompson 1961: 83–84), with bibliography.

According to the *Сравнительный указатель сюжетов: Восточнославянская сказка* (Comparative Index of Plots: East Slavic Fairy Tale) (1979), in the Ukrainian tradition the plot 285 “The Grass Snake in the house: drinking milk, a peasant cuts off the tip of its tail; friendship is broken; the peasant is haunted by misfortune,” as well as its variants recorded mainly in the western regions of Ukraine. Tales with this plot appear in the records of Volodymyr Hnatyuk and Oskar Kolberg, as well as in later records (SUS: 99–100). Thus, in the academic edition of Ivan Berezovsky's *Казки про тварин* (Animal Fairy-Tales) (1986), the text *Вуж і дитина* (Grass Snake and a Child) is presented (Berezovskiy 1986: 208–210), which was recorded in the Puzhnyky village of the Buchatsky district in the Ternopil region, with the time of the record remaining unspecified. This text is close to the Polish versions of the “legend” under the title *Chowanek (Podanie)* published by Oskar Kolberg (1891). The record originating from Sanočany has a shorter version, made almost simultaneously in Stanisław, given in *ZWAK* (Vol. V, 73: 173–174) – a publication of the Anthropological Commission of the Academy of Arts in Kraków 1877–1893. It is obvious that both Polish texts record the plot inherent in the Western-Ukrainian or Eastern-Galician narrative tradition. Not being able to dwell on the analysis of the text in detail, let us emphasize its textological constant, which is realized by the answer formula of the grass snake to the peasant:

We can never go back to the way things were, even if we wanted to. When you look at me now, you'll remember that you had only one son, and he went to rot in the ground because of me. Anger will consume you, driving you to cut off my head. And when I look at you, I'll remember that I had a tail, but lost it because of you. That same anger will take hold of me, and I'll want to sink my teeth into you and take your life. It's best if we live separately: you without me, and I without you. (Berezovskiy 1986: 209)

“So they parted ways,” the narrator concludes his story, “and I don't know how they lived after that, because I wasn't in the world then,” and it was “when animals still knew how to talk”.

In Belarusian folklore, a version of the tale known as *Музикант і ящірка* (The Musician and the Lizard) (285A) exists, yet it is absent from Ukrainian records. Conversely,

within Ukrainian folklore, there exists a variant labeled 285A* (SUS: 100), found in the tale *Справедливий вуж* (The Righteous Serpent) (Berezovskiy 1986: 210), originating from Nizhyn, Chernihiv region, in 1859. Centered around the theme of “just revenge,” the plot unfolds with a peasant disturbing a snake’s nest, leading the serpent to retaliate by poisoning milk in a jar. Upon the peasant’s restitution of the nest, the snake tips over the poisoned milk jar. Such beliefs are prevalent along the Ukrainian-Belarusian border, where Belarusian lore warns that taking a snake’s eggs or harming it may prompt it to poison milk in retaliation, potentially harming the family (Poritska 2004: 37). The concept of justice, as the conceptual core of the plot, receives further development in the tale *Как Бог наказал сына за мать* (How God Punished the Son for His Mother), which was recorded in 1904 in the village of Itkulovo, Ufa Governorate, from a peasant who had heard it while working as a wagoner in the Kyiv Governorate. The tale tells of how a son was punished for considering it “better” to feed a snake than his own mother (Vasil’ev 1911).

The Russian-language version of the plot type 285A as recorded in Semipalatinsk was cited by N. Potanin in the article *Югозападная часть Томской губернии в этнографическом отношении* (The Southwestern Part of Tomsk Province in Ethnographic Perspective) in the *Этнографический Сборник* (Ethnographic Collection) journal. In contrast to the concise moral statement found in Ukrainian texts regarding the motif of the “grass snake as the giver of wealth,” which warns “Never touch a grass snake or provoke it: leave it alone, and it won’t harm you,” the Russian-language version emphasizes a different belief. Given the extensive migrations of Ukrainians, particularly from the Chernihiv province to Siberia, Altai, and Central Asia in the late 19th century, it is plausible that this Russian variant continues the Ukrainian folklore tradition. In this narrative, the belief prevails that a house where a snake resides will be blessed with happiness; they refrain from milking the cow it feeds from, leaving the milk for the snake (*Etnograficheskii Sbornik* VI: 125).³ It is noteworthy that in the early 20th century, a significant number of tales about dragons as guardians of treasures were recorded specifically in the territory of the Semipalatinsk Region and in southern Altai (Tomsk Governorate), along with related toponyms such as the village of Zmiynogorsk and others (Gerasimov 1909).

CONTEXT #1: TRADITIONAL

The widespread dissemination of similar narratives can be attributed to the enduring Slavic notion of the grass snake as a “domestic mythological character.” Given its significance and role in the folk worldview, we can even speak of “the cult of the guardian spirit embodied in the grass snake” (Poritska 2004: 35–38). This ordinary grass snake, which thrives in villages and enters houses attracted by abundant mice, is its primary prey. When a grass snake voluntarily settles in a house or yard, no one dares harm it; instead,

³ *Etnograficheskii Sbornik*, izd. I. Rusk. Geograf. Obshchestvom, VI, 125.

it is seen as a favorable omen. In Prykarpattia, locals believed that if such a grass snake (referred to as a *viper*) settled in a house or stable and was left unharmed, the owner would prosper with good fortune. Such a snake is not mentioned in conversation, or it is called by its external features – *довга* (long), or by its location – *тата, що під корчом сидить* (the one sitting under the log); *поганка* (viper). They believed that there is such a grass snake that sucks a cow. While it milks it, there is also milk, while the cow bellows after it as if it is its own calf. If someone kills such a grass snake, the cow will also die. The Hutsuls also had a ban on killing grass snakes and snakes in general, they were called *софії/софія* – “don’t hit a sophia, because your mother will die.” But even the grass snake could face punishment if it dared to bite a human. For example, in the Podlasie region, it was believed that a grass snake would die if it bit a person (Gura 2012: 362). The dialectal term *смюк* “*s(ts)мюк*” was recorded in Western Polesia and further west in dialects along the Polish border, where it appeared in the form “*smik*”. A comment by a native dialect speaker explains the reasons why this name eventually fell out of use:

We used to call the rainbow *tsmюk*. But people started yelling at us not to say that because it was a sin. We were told to say *rainbow* instead of *tsmюk*. But others still say *tsmюk*, *smюk*. Once, there was such a dragon in the sea, people say, and it was called *Smюk*, which is why it’s a sin to call the rainbow *smюk*. (Hrytsenko 2014: 151-152)

Incidentally, under this very name, a collection of novellas by the renowned Ukrainian writer Ahata Turchynska was once published: *Smюk; Zori na Verkhovyni* (The Dragon; Stars over the Highlands) (Kyiv, 1960).

According to folk beliefs, all snakes have superior strength and unusual wisdom, but only the grass snake is inclined to use its wisdom for the benefit of the house and to be its patron, it takes care of livestock and stays close to them. In Ukraine, the cult of the patron spirit in the guise of a grass snake has survived mainly in Polissia, Prykarpattia, the Carpathians, and in some places in the South. According to beliefs popular in Polissia, a zoomorphic character (in the form of a grass snake or a weasel) lived in a house or in a stable and contributed to the breeding of livestock, while an “enricher” spirit lived in the house and provided prosperity to the owners who fed it (Vinogradova 1998: 414). In Sumy Polissia, there are beliefs about the *ужак* – a householder who enjoys special respect, lives in a house, and next to it there is also a *домовик* who lives in a barn. In the Zhytomyr region, it was believed that a *домовик* in the guise of a grass snake resides in every house and lives near the stove or in the attic. A characteristic opposition of mythological characters is recorded in the Eastern (Belarusian) Polissia: there the grass snake is attributed the functions of the guardian of the house, and the housekeeper is considered the devil (Poritska 2004: 37).

The traditional Slavic, particularly Ukrainian, beliefs about the grass snake reveal a distinct dichotomy. On the one hand, it is seen as a “house spirit-protector,” while on the other, it is viewed as a “demon – a spirit-giver of wealth.” Lyudmyla Vynogradova (1994: 296) extensively analyzed the territorial dichotomy of these mythological representations, noting

that the “blurred” and “varied” image is prevalent in the beliefs of Polissia, whereas in the southwestern part of Ukraine, it appears in more reduced forms. At the same time, beliefs where the “equivalent replacement” of the “house guardian spirit” becomes a “demon – a spirit that gives wealth and brings gold, grain, money to the house” are widespread in the western parts of Belarus and Ukraine (especially in the Carpathian zone). In the territory of Polesia, as a multicultural Slavic region, one can clearly trace a transformation of the image of the grass snake as a “domestic protector” from east to west. The most consistent beliefs regarding the “obligatory” presence of a snake in the household and its role as a “master of the home” were prevalent in the Chernihiv region (Vinogradova 1994: 309). In contrast, in the far southwestern part of Belarus – at the borderlands of Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland, within a tradition ethnically identified as Ukrainian – folklore narratives are dominated by the motif of the “husband-snake,” which is of Ukrainian, more specifically, Western Ukrainian origin (Smirnov 1986: 248–250).

CONTEXT #2: INTERPRETATIVE

Scientific interest in mythology, as is known, was formed during the Enlightenment era in the second half of the 18th century. The plot about the peasant and the snake and its variants have repeatedly attracted the attention of folklore researchers and have been the subject of study. At the end of the 1880s, the probable origins of the plots were considered in the *Северный Вестник* *Severny Vestnik* (North Herald) magazine by an author who hid himself or herself behind the initials Г.Ц. (H.Ts. [n.d.]). In his interpretation of the plot, the author relied on the migration theory popular at the time, which considered the oral and written tradition of the “great cultures” of Asia and Africa, and especially India, as sources. Legends of a didactic nature reached the Mediterranean countries thanks to Arab-Jewish mediation, where they spread among the Indo-European classical peoples. It is suggested that the Turkish invasion brought this plot to the Balkans, where it is recorded among Serbs, Croats, and Albanians (H.Ts. [n.d.]: 70).

We have been able to establish that the author of the article was M. P. Drahomanov, to whom the cryptonym belongs. This conclusion is confirmed in the Dictionary of Ukrainian Pseudonyms and Cryptonyms (16th – 20th Centuries) (Dei 1969: 111). The article did not go unnoticed: a review appeared in *Kievskaya Starina* in 1886, in which the reviewer noted the “immense wealth of knowledge” and the “strict scholarly consistency” demonstrated by H.Ts., without, however, disclosing the actual authorship of the article (A. S-ka 1886). At the same time, the reviewer himself used a cryptonym, which most likely belonged to Andrii Storozhenko – at least, only his publications under that cryptonym are listed in *Kievskaya Starina* for the relevant period.

The plot about the peasant and the snake – in its numerous versions and adaptations, was known in Greek, Latin, and Indian collections, in particular in “Aesop’s fables, in the

Directorium Humanae Vitae”, in German and French translations of the “Panchatantra” (H.Ts. [n.d.]: 55–64). The Indian variant as the original is distinguished by the greatest consistency and conditioning of the storyline, while the secondary Greek and Latin are more reduced. Frequently, the motif of wealth, obligatory in the Indian text, is not mentioned, or the reason why the snake bit the master’s son is not given. Also, the motif of milk, which feeds the snake, varies, most often it is brought bread, water, honey, or it feeds on breadcrumbs. For the Indian tradition, the motif of milk is extremely important as a sign of a ritual sacrifice, which continues in the Slavic tradition of ritual feeding of a domestic helper spirit. Patron grass snakes were treated with milk in many regions. Among the Boiks, as well as among the southern Slavs, there was a belief that grass snakes suck the blood of cows (and sometimes of women), which was embodied at the lexical level: Serb., Croat. *kravosac*, *sisokravac* (Poritska 2004: 38). The folkloric-mythological background of the idea is quite obvious, since it is known that grass snakes never eat milk in nature. At the same time, the moral conclusion remains stable in various traditions regarding the impossibility of reconciliation between the lord and the snake (grass snake) due to the wrong done, which becomes a justification for revenge and enmity.

Obviously, the plot model of the Ukrainian narrative was formed as a result of the transformation of numerous versions from different times, which entered the oral culture through the mediation of many traditions, including the Church Slavonic tradition. It is worth noting that the Polish translation of Aesop’s fables was printed as early as 1585, and translations from Polish to Russian appeared in the 12th century. At the same time, there was a contamination of the images of the snake-protector with the biblical image of the snake-tempter. Thus, a multi-layered narrative plot was formed, embodied in folklore in accordance with the traditional picture of the world, taking into account the value system of one’s own ethnic experience. In turn, this was also due to the fact that the body of religious legends and tales shaped within the Ukrainian tradition had long been connected, as Mykola Sumtsov emphasized, with Ukrainian historical events and figures (Sumtsov 1895: 1).

CONTEXT # 3: INTERTEXTUAL

Narrators of fairy tales, mythological legends, fictions, etc. have long been called “fairy tale writers”. The term “fable”, as myths were called in the days of Kyivan Rus, existed until the end of the 19th century (Poritska 2004: 13–37). Under the term “fable”, the narrative of the plot appeared in Mykola Kostomarov’s novel *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* (1857). The publication of the novel marked the beginning of Kostomarov’s “second period of extremely fruitful literary activity” and “immediately placed him in the ranks of our most prominent historians.” The novel *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi in the Istoriia russkoi etnografii* (History of Russian Ethnography) was characterized in this way (Pypin 1891: 154). Kostomarov, who, as a contemporary noted, stood at the forefront of a new period in historiography

(Skabichevskii 1893: 316), was the first in national historiography to carry out a fundamental study of the life and activity of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky – one of the most prominent political leaders and military commanders of his time.

Mykola Kostomarov (1817–1885) was a Ukrainian and Russian writer, historian and ethnographer, public figure, one of the founders, together with Taras Shevchenko, of the famous Cyril and Methodius Society (1846–1847), later a professor at St. Petersburg University (1859–1862), and a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences (1876). Kostomarov was interested in the history of Ukrainian-Polish relations throughout his life, studied historical and cultural interrelationships in a number of scientific works, in particular in *Последние годы Речи Посполитой* (The Last Years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) (Kostomarov 1869). The author openly supported the Ukrainian national movement and championed the cause of the Ukrainian people during the 1648–1654 struggle led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky against the Polish nobility. In 1874, Kostomarov's essay *Малороссийский гетман Зиновий-Богдан Хмельницкий* (The Little Russian Hetman Zinoviy-Bogdan Khmelnytsky) was published, followed by the article *Богдан Хмельницкий – данник Оттоманской Порты* (Bohdan Khmelnytsky – a Vassal of the Ottoman Porte) in 1878.

Kostomarov, having vast knowledge not only in the field of history, but also of ethnology, already at the beginning of his teaching and scientific activity, as an adjunct professor of St. Volodymyr University of Kyiv, delivered a course of lectures on Slavic mythology, defending the idea of the spiritual unity of Slavic peoples (Sarbei 1979: 192). The scholar regarded oral folk creativity as the finest monument of the past. In his work *Об историческом значении русской народной поэзии* (On the Historical Significance of Russian Folk Poetry) (1844), Kostomarov examined the development of various genres of oral tradition – such as historical songs, legends, and tales – among the Slavic tribes.

Using numerous historical sources in the novel, in particular Polish chronicles, Kostomarov cites in his novel the record of the contemporary of the Ukrainian hetman, the Polish historian Grondskyi, about the meeting that took place on October 29, 1655 between Khmelnytskyi and the ambassador from Jan Casimir, Stanislav Lyubovytskyi. Poland hoped to sway Khmelnytskyi to its side for a joint alliance in the war against Sweden, which had declared war on Poland. In the summer of 1655, Charles X entered Poland, occupied Poznań, Warsaw, and Krakow. In these conditions, Poland sought help from the Cossack army.

After welcoming the Polish ambassadors who arrived with generous gifts and approving the proposals they brought from the king, Khmelnytskyi expressed doubt that these proposals could be accepted. Instead, he offered to listen to a “fairy tale” (Russian *побасенка*), told a story about a peasant who was so rich that everyone envied him, and about a grass snake that provided the owner with wealth. Within the framework of the well-known plot, Khmelnytskyi introduces a lengthy tirade of a peasant who sought answers from healers as to why his wealth disappeared. The healer replied to this:

"While in the past years you treated your pet grass snake well, it took upon itself all the misfortunes that threatened you and freed you from them; now that enmity has arisen between you, all troubles have fallen upon you. If you want to have prosperity, as before, you must make peace with the grass snake." But the grass snake rejected the offer to reconcile and replied: "You are trying in vain to restore the friendship that was between us before, because as soon as I look at my tail, which I lost because of your son, I will immediately feel anger; on the other hand, you, too, as soon as you remember that you have lost your son, will at the same moment boil up in you with parental indignation, so that you will be ready to crush my head. Therefore, such friendship between us will be enough, when you will live in your house, and I will live in my hole, and we will help each other."

"The same thing happened, Mr. Ambassador," Khmelnytskyi emphasized, "between Poles and Rus people. There was a time when we enjoyed happiness and rejoiced at joint successes in the huge house of the Rzeczpospolita. The Cossacks diverted threats and dangers from the kingdom, and took on themselves the blows of the barbarians. The Polish population, respecting the freedom of the Cossacks, did not get angry when they consumed milk, which was found in the corners, and which was bypassed by those who call themselves the only sons of the ancient fatherland. Then the Polish kingdom flourished and shone with happiness before the eyes of all nations. All nations envied us. At that time, no one took booty from the Polish kingdom, on the contrary, wherever the Polish troops went together with the Cossack forces, they won everywhere and celebrated the victory in songs. But later, they, who call themselves the children of the kingdom, began to violate the freedom of the Rus people and beat them on the head, and the Rus people, who were hurt, began to bite. That is why it happened that most of the Rus people were cut off, and many sons of the kingdom died.

From the time when nations remember the misfortunes that they have brought to each other, resentment immediately arises, and even when they begin to reconcile, the matter will not be brought to an end. The wisest man in the world is not capable of establishing a long and lasting peace between us, but only on this condition: let the Polish kingdom renounce everything that belonged to the principalities of the Rus land, let it give the Cossacks all of Rus up to Volodymyr, Lviv, Yaroslavl, Przemyśl, and we, sitting ourselves in our Rus, we will defend the Polish kingdom from enemies. However, I know: even if there are only a hundred lords left in the entire kingdom, they will not agree to it even then. And the Cossacks, as long as they have weapons, will not give up their demands either. Therefore, forgive". (Kostomarov 1884: 216–219)

In the spring of the following year, the Poles again tried to negotiate with Khmelnytskyi. For this purpose, Sir Lyanskoronskyi came, to whom Khmelnytskyi replied:

Enough, gentlemen, to deceive us and consider us fools [...] We will not conclude any treaties with Poland until it renounces all of Rus. Let the Poles officially recognize the Rus people as free, as the Spanish king recognized the Dutch as free. Then we will live with you as friends and neighbors, and not as your subjects and slaves; then we will write the treaty on the eternal tablets. But this will not happen as long as masters rule in Poland. Therefore, there will be no peace between Rus peoples and Poles. (Kostomarov 2005: 65)

It is known that Khmelnytskyi had private reasons for taking revenge on the Polish nobility – "to save his life and take revenge for his dignity", which was shown in his novel by

Henryk Sienkiewicz and vividly depicted in the film by Jerzy Hoffman. According to a contemporary, Sienkiewicz's novel *Ogniem i mieczem* (With Fire and Sword) became "an extraordinary sensation" and achieved "tremendous success" in Polish literature. The reviewer noted that the author's reasoning was "simple: Poland was the bearer of civilization, full of civic virtues; the Ukrainians were a wild tribe, incapable of culture, yearning for 'savage freedom,' and therefore needed to be restrained and civilized through strong authority – even at the cost of an 'ocean of blood.'" The review further emphasized that "all the extreme intolerance nurtured by seventeenth-century Poland, all the scornful attitude toward the 'peasant' people – their tribe, faith, and customs – found full sympathy in this talented nineteenth-century writer [...]. The author did not suspect that the struggle between Poland and Ukraine in the seventeenth century was provoked by political injustice and marked the beginning of Poland's downfall" (Pypin 1891: 288). The Cossack element "toppled" Poland. "Poland fell and crushed Ukraine" (Zarudnyi 2004: 127).

The inflicted insult influenced Khmelnytskyi's determination to start an uprising against the Polish lords, who brought the people to revolt "with violence and insults." Described as the "apotheosis" of the struggle between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, the Khmelnytsky Uprising marked the beginning of the war of liberation in Polish Ukraine (Gumilyov 2024: 200). Understanding the pain and realizing the justice of the anger of the "slaves" became the key to a successful joint struggle for the "social ideal that was created by the people's life" (Kostomarov 2005: 31). The "fable" model provided a valuable verification of the meaning of historical "truth", thus confirming the conceptual certainty of Khmelnytskyi's story. The well-known folklore text, both in the Ukrainian and in the Polish tradition, should have become an understandable metaphor in international negotiations, emphasizing the consistency of the intentions of the struggle for the national sovereignty of Ukraine.

The double intertextualization of the folklore narrative – in Khmelnytskyi's retelling, as well as in Kostomarov's presentation two hundred years later – becomes vivid evidence of conceptualization, in accordance with current models of the worldview of the borderland nation's life experience. According to the contemporary Kostomarov, between "Scilla and Charybdis" – Moscow and Warsaw (Shalak 2019: 186) and more broadly – between East and West, according to Yevhen Malaniuk and Viacheslav Lypynsky. Today we stress that the history might have taken a different course if the Polish kings had kept their word when granting amnesty to the participants of the Cossack uprisings. However, the arrogant and vain nobility doomed both their own country and Ukraine to ruin. The Cossack force "toppled" Poland; Poland fell and crushed Ukraine (Zarudnyi 2004: 127).

CONTEXT #4: IDEOLOGICAL

Contemporary scholars note that Kostomarov's historiosophical views were characterized by an identification of the Cossacks with the Ukrainian people and a perception of the two as a unified community (Danylenko 2018: 405). The Cossack epic became an important

historical source for him, while the Ukrainian Cossacks were elevated to the status of a national legend. Being a folklorist, Kostomarov presented poetic examples of Ukrainian Cossack folklore in the novel and cited the lyrics of historical songs from the gatherings of that time. Among them is the Cossack song *Rozlylysia kruti berezhechky* (Streams Spilled from the Steep Banks) titled as *Торжество русского народа (1648–1649)* (The Triumph of the Russian People (1648–1649)) (Kostomarov 2004: 589). Today, after numerous reinterpretations and additions (both authorial and folkloric), this song is known as the “patriotic anthem” of the Ukrainian people *Oy u luzi chervona kalyna* (Oh the Red Viburnum in the Meadow).

Within the framework of contemporary ideological discourse in Ukraine, the ideas of the heroic Cossacks have become an important historical myth in the formation of Ukrainian identity (Oliinyk 2023: 16). In the trend of “modern inclusive nationalism” as the ideological mainstream, the tendency to reproduce the national myth with the aim of affirming the strength of the national tradition becomes noticeable. The concept of *unforgiveness/revenge* is actively and diversely included in the forms of modeling the ideology of “eternal unforgiveness for the enemy”. In particular, on February 23, 2023, a new commemorative 20 hryvnia banknote was presented in Ukraine. “We remember! We will not forgive!”. The text of the banknote and the visualization of the symbols of Ukrainian folklore and historical tradition were intended to show, as reported by UNN news agency with reference to the National Bank of Ukraine, “the struggle of Ukraine against the Russian invaders, to perpetuate the spirit of the Ukrainian people, its resilience, indomitability and heroism.” The composition, symbolizing national longing – tied hands, a poppy flower, a viburnum bunch, an anti-tank hedgehog and a crown of thorns, is reproduced in the verbal text: “Let’s not forget! We will not forgive! No one!”.

Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Myth and meaning* compared the myth created according to the principle of “constant reconstruction” with music (Zubrytska 1996: 353–355). He noted that the myth, like a musical score, “must be grasped as a whole,” as “the theme that appears at various points in a long narrative.” And it is from the story and language that mythology and music emerged, one emphasizing the sense of meaning, and the other the sense of sound. Perfect music, like perfect storytelling, emerges from balance. Equilibrium arises from justice, and justice – from the meaning of being and the universe.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the Ukrainian folkloric narrative plot SUS 285 (“the grass snake in the hut”) as a stable model of conceptualization through which the notion of *unforgiveness* is articulated, preserved, and reinterpreted within ethnocultural memory. The primary aim of the article was to demonstrate how a traditional narrative, characterized by formal stability and semantic openness, functions as a cognitive and discursive mechanism for

generalizing historical experience. The analysis confirms that this plot retains its explanatory power across different cultural, historical, and communicative contexts.

The folkloric material shows that the concept of *unforgiveness* is not presented as a situational emotional reaction but as an ethically grounded and culturally regulated response to an irreversible violation of a primordial norm. In the examined narratives, reconciliation proves impossible not because of excess passion, but because memory itself becomes a constitutive element of justice. The grass snake's formulaic refusal to reconcile verbalizes a deeply archaic principle: moral balance cannot be restored once the symmetry of harm has been destroyed. This principle constitutes the semantic core of the plot and remains stable despite variations in motifs, characters, and narrative framing.

The intertextual analysis has demonstrated that the inclusion of this folklore plot into Bohdan Khmelnytskyi's political discourse and later into Mykola Kostomarov's historical novel represents not a break with tradition, but a continuation of its cognitive function. Through intertextual "recoding," the folkloric narrative acquires new contextual meanings while preserving its conceptual nucleus. In this sense, folklore operates as a medium of cultural memory capable of translating mythological models into historical and ideological discourses without losing structural coherence.

From a methodological perspective, the study confirms the productivity of combining ethnolinguistic, folkloristic, and discourse-analytical approaches. The separation of the methodological framework from textual analysis makes it possible to trace how mythological representations, stereotypes, and binary oppositions are activated within specific narrative structures. The examined material illustrates that folklore discourse should be understood not merely as a repository of archaic beliefs, but as a dynamic semiotic system oriented toward supra-individual usage and long-term cultural transmission.

The contemporary contextualization of the concept of *unforgiveness* does not replace or surpass the folklore analysis but rather highlights the enduring relevance of traditional narrative models. Current socio-political realities activate meanings already embedded in the folklore text, demonstrating how collective memory reuses inherited narrative structures to comprehend experiences of conflict, trauma, and moral asymmetry. In this respect, the folklore plot functions as a cognitive template rather than as an ideological instrument.

In conclusion, the Ukrainian narrative plot "the grass snake in the hut" reveals folklore as a stable yet flexible mechanism of conceptualization that mediates between myth, history, and present-day interpretation. Its ability to remain meaningful across centuries confirms the potential of folkloric analysis to offer lasting analytical models applicable beyond immediate historical circumstances. The concept of *unforgiveness*, as articulated through this plot, emerges as a culturally encoded form of ethical reasoning, deeply rooted in the structures of traditional worldview and collective memory.

AFTERWORD

The past can only be overcome through a narrative of what happened (Arendt 1951). In the preface-afterword to his poem "Haydamaky" (1841), in which he depicted the power and fury of the people who rose up against the tyranny of the Polish nobility, which led to the brutal suppression of the uprising, Taras Shevchenko noted: "Thank God that is over – and too much if you remember that we are the children of one mother, that we are all Slavs. The heart aches, but the story must be told: let the sons and grandsons see that their parents were wrong, let them make friends with their enemies again. May the Slavic land, covered with rye and wheat, as if with gold, remain undivided forever from sea to sea" (Shevchenko 1956: 109). Today, when the percentage of Slavic peoples in the world has decreased from 9.8% at the beginning of the 20th century to 5% (data from the early 2000s) (Naulko 2008: 481), remembering these words spoken almost two hundred years ago, we ask ourselves – will it be so?

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KONCEPTUALIZACIJA "NEOPRAŠTANJA" (NARATIVNI ZAPLET "BJELOUŠKA U KOLIBI"): MITOLOGIJA, INTERTEKSTUALNOST, KONTEKSTUALIZACIJA

Rad se bavi ukrajinskim inačicama narativnog zapleta "bjelouška u kolibi" i njegovom varijantom "pravedna bjelouška" (ATU 285 i 285A*), koja se odnosi na koncept "neopraštanja". Zapisi nastali u različitim dijelovima Ukrajine otkrivaju dijalektiku folklorne tradicije koja se ogleda u polifunktionalnosti i varijabilnosti međunarodnih inačica navedenog zapleta. Bajka prikazuje mitološka vjerovanja o bjelouški kao zoomorfnom utjelovljenju demonološkog lika koji se u tradicijskoj kulturi štuje kao demon zaštitnik kuće i donositelj bogatstva. Istodobno, formalna stabilnost zapleta omogućuje semantičke promjene i ambivalentne tematske pozicije, dok njezina intertekstualna transformacija djeluje u okviru konceptualnih modela "kolektivne traume". Iz ove se perspektive istražuje navedena basna kako ju je ispričao Bogdan Hmeljnicky, i to kao politička metafora

koja ilustrira "neopraštanje", "osvetu" i povijesni dokaz "kolektivne traume". Glavni je element kompozicije dijalog sa stabilnim formulaičnim karakterom, čime se naglašavaju kontinuitet kulturne baštine i djelovanje kognitivnog modela. Povijesno točan tekst Hmeljnickog iz 1656. godine zabilježio je suvremenik tog ukrajinskog hetmana i kroničar njegovih ratova s Poljskom, a spomenuo ga je Mykola Kostomarov u svom romanu *Bogdan Hmeljnicki* (1857). Suvremena kontekstualizacija koncepta "neopraštanja" aktualizira opoziciju naše – tuđe i odražava ratnu situaciju u Ukrajini, koja se opisuje kao "rat za identitet".

Ključne riječi: ukrajinski folklorni narativ, simbol zmiје, rat za identitet