Semiotic analysis of the oral stories from the island of Vis

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Abstract

The author analyzes the semiotic structure of three oral non-fiction stories from the island of Vis. They belong to a type of oral narrative called “facenda” in the insular dialect. “Facenda” is an oral non-fiction story of humorous character. The stories analyzed here, in spite of the fact they come from different storytellers, are mutually connected. The meaning of the first story is deepened only with the meaning of the third story. Analysis concerns the actual problem of globalization which destroys the organic human community. The great changes imposed by the modern world make life impossible in small communities. With a semiotic analysis the author reveals the deep narrative structures of oral literature on the island of Vis.

Keywords: oral literature, facenda, the island of Vis, semiotics, globalisation.

1 Introduction

1.1 The definition of “facenda” as a type of narrative

The original meaning of the word novel is novelty, event. However, it is only in the figurative sense a story about a certain event. In the same way, facenda in the common speech of the island of Vis means event, as well as a story about a certain event (Božanić [1]).

Facenda is a representational type of oral literature of the island of Vis, whose two major characteristics are non-fiction (the concentration on the factual) and the comedy. The very word facenda derives from the Venetian vernacular. In Boerio’s dictionary the word facenda means a job, work [2].
1.2 The non-fictional aspect of facenda

The Greek word *apomnemoneuma* was used by the Greek apologists in the second century to differentiate the evangelists’ documents from the false pagan stories. A. Jolles uses the Latin translation of this word *memorabile*, in order to name a narrative model of actuality which allows a concentration of meaning with the careful choosing of facts [3].

C. W. Sydow disputes this definition and introduces the word *memorat* for so-called true stories about personal events, or events witnessed close hand. Sydow also differentiates the word *memorat* from the word *fabulat*, the type of narrative which is in the domain of oral tradition and is not connected to the storyteller’s experience or closeness with the partakers of event [4].

In Croatian literary research, M. Bošković Stulli is the first to write about non-fiction stories from the oral tradition as a literary type. This type of non-fiction story she names *stories about life*, according to J. Michalek’s definition which he uses to describe stories about personal events. M. Bošković Stulli defines the meaning of this word in the following way: “…this word includes memories about real events or events from the storyteller’s life, or the telling of his friends or close ancestors who have experienced the event” [5].

In the same year, 1984, another work about the phenomenon of non-fiction storytelling appeared. Distinguished Croatian theoretician of literature and narration, V. Biti, devised a definition *everyday story* for this type of narrative [6].
However, none of the above mentioned definitions (memorabile, memorat, stories about life, everyday story) is appropriate to precisely describe this type of oral story (Božanić [1]). Facenda can be included in these definitions, but as shall be explained, these facenda narratives have a narrower, more specific definition. With analysis of these three stories, the exact potentiality of facenda will be investigated, and it will be demonstrated that this term, of the Vis island dialect, is the most suitable encapsulation of these particular narrative constructs.

2 Analysis

2.1 The first story: How the village Okjucina appeared and disappeared

2.1.1 The etiological character of the story
The story has an etiological character (a story about the founding of a village, about an ancient cause that determines future consequences - from Greek aitia - cause). The storyteller relies on the oral tradition, which reaches back to the indefinite ancient past.

2.1.2 Composition
The compositional structure includes the following motifs:
- The power-wielder’s award for merits
- Search for the location for the future village
- Accident (storm at sea) which enables good luck (reaching of the goal)
- Foundation-stone laying
- The evasion of the harmony factor - the rooster’s head
This composition is based on a simpler deep structure
- Award for the merit
- Paradoxical realisation of award
  - misfortune which brings good luck (the storm enables one to reach the goal)
  - good fortune which brings disaster (sacrifice for the founded village’s good fortune - the elimination of the sacrifice effect - the unconsecrated foundations: the premonition of ruin.)

The erection of the village begins with the building of the defence fortress and the church. The two buildings are intended to defend life - the fortress defends the earthly, and the church heavenly life. The building starts with a sacrificial gesture which needs to ensure the continuity of life, perseverance and balance of the organic human community, as well as its vitality.

2.2 The second story: The Thieving cat

2.2.1 The fatality of the cat
The story begins with fairytale language - the existential, numerological formula: Once upon a time there was a cat in Okjucina.... The initial position of this motif’s subject (cat) signals its protagonist status in the facenda’s narrative structure, in which it is expected that only humans can be actants (those who carry the plot), while animals can only be circumstants, a differentiation made
by French semiotician L. Tesnière [7]. The plot is based on the human - cat relationship, which can be reduced to the relation between the plot of elimination (three attempts to remove the cat) and the trait of unremovability: the cat has nine lives. This relationship concerns the collective unconscious: the cat as a symbol of the underground, darkness (the fatality of the black cat), and misfortunes: the cat crosses the road, the futility of resistance: the uniqueness of human life and the repeatability of the cat’s life.

2.2.2 The paradoxical turn
Paradoxical experience of the life is the very basis of facenda. The humorous element of facenda is based mostly on the paradoxical turns. The cathartic resolutions of tension which facenda unweaves (relaxatio animae) in the public space of the organic community are realised with paradoxical turns. In this example the paradoxical turns are graded with the succession of three events: 1. People take the cat to a deserted island, the cat returns to the village before them; 2. People set the cat on fire, and the cat sets the village on fire; 3. People throw the cat into a hole, and the cat steals a bag from them.

2.2.3 The symbolism of the table
In this story the table is mentioned more than once. The table is the axis of family community. What the square means to the wider, organic community, the table means to the family. This is the place of dining (as opposed to the place of feeding), since the social dimension of existence is highlighted in the act of sharing a meal. There is a hierarchy in the ceremony of sharing a meal, storytelling, counselling in the matters of life, arranging various works. In general, this is where maintenance of the community goes on. This table has a role of centripetal force, of determining the family within the superior organic community. The cat is attracted to the centre, the centripetal force of communion with man, but the cat is the force which acts from below; from below the table, the underground, irrational, uncontrolled, and mysterious. She is the personification of the forces of entropy, which threaten to disintegrate and dissolve the community.

2.2.4 The forces of entropy
Here on the level of micro community, symbolically is represented the drama of existence, which concerns the entire organic community on a deep level. The forces of entropy (personified in the cat) dissolve the centripetal force of community. The act of throwing the cat in the hole is a gesture of defence of community against the forces of entropy, which threaten to destroy it.

2.3 The third story: The man who maintained roads

2.3.1 The cat motif
This story completes a narrative whole with the previous two stories. It becomes a final chapter of a single story about the birth and death of one village, one insular micro world, and one organic community. Only here is realised the
interaction which demands re-reading in order to understand the connections between the motifs in all three stories.

The key motif here is the cat. In the first story the cat motif is peripheral. However, at the end of the third story the cat motif becomes central to the first story. In the second story the cat motif becomes a subject. In the third story the cat motif is seemingly peripheral, but in conjugation with the previous two stories this motif becomes central.

2.3.2 The conflict of the centrifugal and the centripetal principle

The essential relationship at work here is the relationship between two opposing driving forces: the force of dispersion of the organic human community (centrifugal force) and the force of cohesion, gathering, sustaining (centripetal force). The paradox is realised - the centripetal principle functions even when it has entirely lost its meaning. Namely, the organic human community is reduced to the remaining individual and therefore loses the attribute of sociability (conditio sine qua non), but in the process the remaining individual does not lose the attribute of sociability. Like a dismembered octopus tentacle it keeps moving, feeling its way in the dark, looking for the goal set in motion in the organic human community, and this goal contains a concept of journey as its essence. The journey, namely, includes the Other, the movement of the individual toward another individual. The journey is the quintessence of sociability. The journey includes the other, and in Slavic languages the word for the other drugi (from Indo-European *dhrough-o-s) is etymologically related to the old Slavic word *drugъ (ь), which means companion, friend. Therefore, only drugи - the other one, can be drug, a friend. And the other one is the person who is (per definitionem) different.

2.3.3 The reduction of diversity

The principle of diversity is the principle of social identity. With the disappearance of the Other, society disappears as well, along with the centripetal force of community. The reflex of this force, outside of the context of sociability, is the emanation of the indestructible vital force, which opposes the force of entropy, the centrifugal force which threatens to disperse the substance of the organic human community. In the moment of completion of the dispersion process of the organic human community, the story focuses in on the reflex of the centripetal principle: the only village inhabitant maintains the roads which no one will use ever again. He keeps up maintenance of the road even while he is forcefully removed from the village, while he traverses the road for the last time in his life. This act, as a symbolic gesture of the defence of culture against nature, is perceived as humorous because of the lack of apparent sense of purpose. However, this act, rid of teleological pragmatism, loses its comic nature because it is filled with tragic sense of futile defence of the diversity of the world caught up in the unstoppable process of globalisation and unification. The process of globalisation destroyed any singularity and cultural diversity. The act of defence of an organic human community becomes useless and comic.
2.3.4 The symbolical meaning of the road
This is a story about a road. The story is focused on the reflex of sociability. The act of road’s defence is the prerequisite of sociability. From the eastern Adriatic Roman civilisation marched into the Balkan Peninsula by building roads. This type of a road (the Roman road) becomes the symbol of a type of culture. The road is a sign of culture, the symbol of the social organisation of human life. The last inhabitant of a small island village defends the sense of an organic human community maintaining the roads in the moment when the process of globalisation destroyed definitively any reason to maintain the roads. His act is subconscious reflex of defence the organic human community and world cultural diversity.

2.3.5 Death of the organic human community
The last inhabitant of the village maintains roads that no one will traverse again. His act is a symbolic gesture of defence of organic human community at the moment of its disappearance. The process of globalisation, followed by general standardisation, inflicts a terrible cost with the loss of diversity. The diversity of the human world retreats before unified models which have global extent. The organic human community disappears, along with its language, its collective memory, its customs. This disappearance is manifested even physically, with the concentration of people in large urban agglomerations. They flock there from the spaces of organic human communities, attracted by the gravitational force of globalisation.

In this movement, the oral tradition loses its addressee. The last storytellers do not have recipients for their stories. For the first time in history these storytellers face a deaf audience. All the information relevant for survival comes from the outside world, and not the collective memory. The experience of a reasonable and surveyed world disappears definitively.

3 Synthesis

3.1 The coincidence of a connection between the stories of various storytellers
These three stories told by two storytellers, demand an even more integral interpretation. Though the stories deal with different times (the first story is about the founding of a village, the second about its life, and third about its end), the same meaning connects them all. The different storytellers did not intend these stories to fit together and form one completed story, and in fact the teller of the first story did not know of the two later stories, and the teller of the second and third stories did not know of the first. Despite this, they make one narrative from three compositionally, stylistically and semantically mutually connected stories. The unity of these stories is thus realised in spite of the intention of its storytellers. It is realised not in authorial authority but in the stream of time through which the collective memory of this insular world flows. Recognition of this unity is one of the tasks facing the semiotic critic of the global period.
3.2 The intersecting of various narrative structures

J. Lotman says that the unique quality of artistic prose is achieved when various structures intersect, uniqueness marking each one of these structures. He develops this idea even further, with the following conclusion: “The ability of the text elements to enter into various contextual structures and gain various meaning, is one of the deepest traits of artistic prose.” [8]. This intersection of narrative structures and the multiple levels of meaning gives this narrative discourse an astonishing literary value, which is then realised in non-fiction narrative structure. However, this non-fiction structure is modelled according to the laws of narration, the laws of narrative structure that demand resolution in the story’s conclusions. And in this example we can see the realisation of an astonishing integration of three disparate stories into one story whose meaning condenses the deep level of significance, otherwise unfathomable at the level of each individual story. The non-fictional nature of this discourse is therefore fictionalised. This fictional structure leans on the factual, modelling it according to the laws of narration. As M. Solar says: “… the elementary structure of the story appears everywhere where people address each other, and especially where they talk about each other” [9].

3.3 The comic element as differen-tia specifica of facenda

The comic element and non-fictionality are key characteristics of the oral story from the island of Vis. These stories have the character of non-fiction. Actual people are described in everyday typical situations. However, these situations are somewhat unusual: they do not have at first glance a significant characteristic-comicality. They contain comic elements, but their humour is not typical of the type of humour present in other oral stories of the island of Vis. In these stories the ominous presence of death is present at the very beginning of life. It is in the act of laying down the foundation stone of the first building, whose purpose is to gather around it houses and life. Therefore, the important element of the oral non-fiction comic story, known as facenda on Vis, is deepened. Comicality is one of the most important characteristics in the facenda stories, as a way of overcoming the strenuous way of life - like relaxatio animae.

In the first story one can detect the comedy in the sudden event caused by the cat. Yet, a very serious moment occurs: the disruption of the ceremony of erecting the village foundations the fortress needs to gather life and defend it. The founding of a village is a sacred moment. Human future at that point in the universe, and all of the future life, is symbolically concentrated in this moment. The foundation stone is spattered with the rooster’s blood. The rooster’s head needs to be sacrificed for the firmness of the foundation. According to traditional belief the rooster is a symbol of life, of human habitat. Therefore, the sacrifice of the rooster’s head should be the symbol of the continuity of life in the holy act of its founding. But this ceremony is disrupted - the cat steals the rooster’s head, and escapes into the woods. The holy moment of sanctification is disturbed with a triviality. The rooster’s head, whose original intention was to serve in the holy act of village founding, in that way simply becomes merely food - devoured by...
the cat. This is by definition a comic situation. The sacred is made vulgar with a trivial act.

In the second story the comicality is more evident. The entire village is concentrated on one cat. They don’t know how to get rid of it. No one wants to kill it because they are afraid of its magical powers: according to traditional belief, the cat has nine lives. The cat swims across the sea and returns home, the cat escapes the fire which should have been its burial pyre, and in escaping sets the village on fire. In the end when the villagers succeed in throwing the cat in a hole - the cat steals the bag. Dramaticism produced with the tension of removing a thieving cat is in conflict with the triviality of a bag “stolen” by the cat in the hole. The trivialised dramaticism produces the comic effect.

In the third story an old man, the last inhabitant of his village, resists leaving the abandoned village. While two people help him walk up the road, from the village into town, the old man still manages to shove the stones away from the road, even though this road has lost its meaning because there is no more life here. This futile gesture, apparently devoid of meaning, can be interpreted as humorous—indeed, at oral tellings it often provokes laughter.

3.4 Eros and thanatos

The cat motif connects all three stories. There are two forces mutually conflicted, as well as mutually dependent: the force of life-eros, the creative force personified in the rooster from the first story, and the entropy force, of destruction - thanatos, personified in the cat in all three stories - the thieving cat. The rooster is the herald of light, the sun; it symbolises the solar principle. The cat dives out of the shadows, it symbolises misfortune. If the cat crosses the man’s road, it is a sign of misfortune. The cat is very powerful and indestructible; it has nine lives. The establishing of the eros principle is a miracle always joined with the forces of destruction.

The inability to consecrate the foundations of the organic human community in the first story is the cause of its death, the subject of the last story. As a symbol of a destructive force the cat prevents the sanctification of the life foundations. Thanatos comes up from the depths in order to sow the seeds of destruction next to the seeds of life.

The first attempt to eliminate the cat in the second story is not successful. The cat returns, provoking the next attempt at elimination. The third attempt seems to work. However, in the third story the cat suddenly appears from a dark underground (the hole in which it was thrown), and the depths of time, as a personification of the same force which prevents the symbolical gesture of sanctification of the foundations of life (the cat from the first story which stole the rooster’s head).

The conclusion of the last story...As if she had done nothing, is thus an ironic reference to the movement to nothingness that the dark forces have concluded. The thanatos force at the moment of the one-way departure of the last inhabitant from the vacant village is personified in the black cat on the road, showing up from the dark underground labyrinth of time, in order to remain forever in the hauntingly vacant village without a single human being.
4 Brief synopsis of the stories

4.1 Viskovic Builds Okjucina Village

This story takes place in the 1570s. As a reward for his success in fighting against the Turks, an admiral of the Venetian navy receives from a Venetian doge a property in Dalmatia. He can choose whatever he wants, but he decides to take a beautiful deserted bay, and to build village there. He takes a rooster with him because back then, when the foundations were dug, according to custom, they would kill a rooster and put its head into the foundations. They believed that way the house would be stronger, and would not fall apart. When the time comes to kill the rooster, Viskovic takes a hatchet and chops the rooster's head off. However, at that moment a cat jumps, fiendishly grabs the head and runs away into the bushes. Viskovic has to build the foundations without the rooster's head. Later on the cat just shows up, like nothing has happened! It is the beginning of Okjucina village.

4.2 The Thieving Cat

This story takes place in the 1960s. There is a family living in the village Okjucina, and they have a cat. They call her the thieving cat because she is more trouble than she is worth. She steals anything from right before your eyes. Some say that they should kill her, but nobody really likes the idea of killing the cat, and it is not easy to get rid of a cat, because a cat has nine lives. So they decide to take her to Kamik, an islet less then fifty meters from the bay of Okjucina. However she swims back to the coast, returning home as if nothing had happened! Then they decide to tie straw around her waist: to tie it on with a rope and set it on fire. They are not going to set the cat on fire, but the straw, they say. Whether she burns or not, is none of their business. But, when the cat feels the fire she runs into a fence, squeezes through a small hole, and the burning saddle of straw gets stuck in the fence. The fence starts burning, and the cat runs away. They somehow manage to extinguish the fire with a great effort. When they came home the cat is under the table, like nothing had happened! Then they decide to put the cat into a bag and throw her into a deep pit. But back then bags were very valuable, so they do not want to loose the bag. The man who was sent to do the task tries to turn the bag upside down to drop the cat into the pit, but she clings to the top of the bag and scratches him. He gets scared and lets go of both the bag and the cat. It seems the fiendish cat manages to steal even the bag!

4.3 The Man Who Looked After the Roads

This story takes place in the 1970s. The people who lived in Okjucina have one by one left, and the time has come when there is nobody left there besides one old man, Uncle Tony. This Uncle Tony has a habit, when he is walking on a path, to stop and to repair the path. The time has come when there is nobody left to walk the paths, neither animal nor human, but nevertheless Uncle Tony shapes the rocks and cut the trees, lest they obstruct the path. One day the fishermen tell
the people in Komiza (town on the island of Vis) that they have not seen Uncle Tony for several days, so two men decide to go to Okjucina to see what is going on. They find him in his bed: he is sick. They want to take him to Komiza because there is nobody left in Okjucina, and he could die there alone. However he does not want to go with them. He wants to stay in Okjucina and to die where he was born. They have to pull him out of bed, dress him and lead him from the house by hand. As they walk towards the car, Uncle Tony clears the rocks, even though he knows this is the last time he will walk the path he had walked all his life. So they put Uncle Tony in the car and start driving toward Komiza. After maybe a hundred meters a black cat crosses their path, as if she has done nothing!

References