
A Double Micro-Perspective

Koskinen-Koivisto, Eerika 2014. *Her Own Worth. Negotiations of Subjectivity in the Life Narrative of a Female Labourer*. *Studia Fennica Ethnologica* 16. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 215 pp. Ill. ISBN 978-952-222-609-9.

This publication is based on the author's PhD dissertation, successfully defended at Jyväskylä University in 2013. In her study, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto analyses twelve life history interviews, which she recorded for a period of three years with her own grandmother, Elsa Koskinen. The aim of the study is to use the interview material to discuss issues of gender and class, but also to

follow on how economic, cultural and political changes at the macro level of Finnish society are handled by Elsa in her narratives at the individual micro level.

The study is linked to a folkloristic research tradition on individual narrative repertoires that dates back to the work first done by Mark Azadovskij in 1926 (*Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin*, FFC 86) and followed by, among others, Linda Dégh (*Märchen, Erzähler und Erzählgemeinschaft dargestellt an der ungarischen Volksüberlieferung* 1962), Ragnar Bjersby (*Traditionsbärare på Gotland vid 1800-talets mitt*, 1964), Juha Pentikäinen (*Oral Repertoire and World View* 1978) and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (*Kertomus ja kerronta* 1988). Contrary to several of her predecessors, however, Koskinen-Koivisto introduces a narrator who is 'not an extraordinary personality or a well-known expert story-teller' (p. 15). The difference in approach may reveal a difference in attitude towards the material and the narrator as well as towards the role of narrating. The folklorist hunting for expert story-tellers is probably more interested in documenting artistic and performative skills than in documenting the role of everyday, low-key conversations among ordinary people.

Typically, early folklore studies directed its interest towards the traditions of the (allegedly) disappearing farming society, while to a large extent neglecting urban and working class folklore. Have the cultural patterns characteristic of the era of industrial production currently faded away (at least in Western Europe) to a degree that make them tempting to investigate by a new generation of folklorists? Elsa Koskinen was born (in 1927) into a factory worker's family. She did not even finish the six years elementary school, but started at the age of 12 to work as a maid in local middle-class families. From age 15 until her retirement, she worked on the production line at the local ironworks factory.

A central idea in the book, from the title onwards, is 'negotiations of subjectivity'. At an early stage of the book, Koskinen-Koivisto declares that she wants to approach the life story of her grandmother as a 'process of negotiating subjectivity' (p. 26). This idea opens up several different

lines of thought. The negotiation points in the direction of dialogue, both between interviewer and interviewee, between narrator and the narrator's memories of personal experiences, and between the individual who experienced them and the surrounding society; furthermore, the study makes reference to dialogic anthropology and discusses the researcher's reflexivity. Subjectivity, in the sense of somebody striving to become a conscious subject, in its turn evokes such concepts as agency and identity. Both concern the process of positioning oneself with the help of narratives and narrating. Not surprisingly, the author emphasises that, in her opinion, different dimensions of social life should be regarded not as separate, but as intertwined (p. 29). It is my impression that Koskinen-Koivisto throughout the book actually manages to keep all these balls in the air, even if it is not always obvious to the reader how they are culturally interwoven.

Within the twelve longer life interviews, Koskinen-Koivisto has been able to identify no less than 276 micro-narratives, or shorter accounts of certain episodes in Elsa's life, many of which are repeated several times. She takes Finnish folklorist Lena Marander-Eklund's definition of micro-narratives as a starting point: '[m]icro-narratives are dense formulations, which express and dramatize important matters in the narrator's life' (p. 48). The small, individual narratives may demonstrate different kinds of relationships to collectively accepted grand narratives, or master narratives, and Koskinen-Koivisto shares with the reader her reflections concerning some of these terms (p. 51f), but does not dive deep into the discussion. After comparing her approach to that of other narrative analysts, the author states that her interest lies not in the structural construction of the micro-narratives, but in their content. An alternative – or complementary – approach could have been to use folkloristic narrative analysis to show how it was possible for Elsa Koskinen in her conversations with her grand-daughter to recount memories of her experiences in narrative form.

During the war years, when many Finnish men were enlisted in the army, considerable responsibility rested on the female half of the population not only for family care and home-making

but also for industrial production. In Chapter 3, the emphasis is on how gender topics surfaced in the mixed group of workers at the iron mill. Humour, irony and narrative competence were important skills for the young female workers to manage in order to get along in an environment where traditional male ideals were predominant. The gender issues appearing in Elsa's life narrative are given keen attention by the author, who successfully applies an intersectional approach to describe how Elsa relates to such existing stereotypes as those about the 'heroic mother' and the 'working mother'.

In this chapter, one of Elsa's key micro-narratives (maybe it is at the very core of her life history) is discussed. This story has been named 'Back to Work' and recounts the crucial moment in Elsa's life when she, at a time when both her husband and her daughter were studying, decided to go back to work in the factory. Instead of becoming a passive housewife provided for by her engineer-to-be husband, Elsa chose, against her husband's wishes, to once more enter her former role as a 'greasy-skinned worker'.

In the chapter on social class, the author analyses Elsa's micro-narratives concerning the conditions at the ironworks, where she spent most of her working career. Koskinen-Koivisto examines how Elsa handled hierarchies, class stereotypes and existing social groups through the help of her narratives. In detail, we are shown how Elsa uses narrative means to position herself in relation to stereotypical ideals and historical facts concerning different aspects of working-class identity. Several informative examples are given regarding the interplay between the workers and the mill owner, the solidarity among the workers, problems connected with workers' alcoholism, generational conflicts, oppression and professional pride as well as other recurring narrative motifs.

Drawing inspiration from Mikhail Bakhtin, the author takes the vantage point that the narrated identity consists of different voices that at times may contradict each other (p. 145), or – put differently – that the narrating self is interacting with several narrated past selves. One chapter of

the book is devoted to following how Elsa applied different narrative strategies to position herself in relation to the elements of social change that she had experienced during different phases of her life. On the one hand, Elsa appreciated the arrival of new machines and technology that made work easier both at home and in the factory. On the other hand, she expressed feelings of nostalgia when reminiscing about the idyllic moments of her childhood and adolescence. Koskinen-Koivisto links these accounts of temporal changes to spatial and topographical changes (such as the demolishing of the factory's smokestack) and to the metaphor of life as a journey. Several of Elsa's micronarratives about the journeys she had undertaken seem to present fairly clear outlines of her personality as she has understood it at different points of her life. At the same time, they can be taken as examples that a human life seldom is as smooth and consistent as a skilfully composed narrative.

The double micro-perspective (studying small narrative units collected from one single individual) allowed the researcher to follow at the most detailed level how social and cultural changes are transformed into emerging cultural patterns, with narrative structures and dialogical interaction serving as generative tools. The conscious attempt to apply different forms of close reading to empirical material in order to understand cultural processes at different collective levels has always been one of the central methods of folkloristics and ethnology. Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto's study constructively demonstrates how such closeness to the empirical material typical of a well performed folkloristic analysis will reveal knowledge that other theoretical approaches might easily overlook. In her conclusion, she rightly points out that it would take several similar investigations to be able to demonstrate what figures of thought and what narrative patterns have received collective acceptance. It is to be hoped that this solid monograph by a very talented folklorist will be followed by many more.

Ulf Palménfelt