

Research Report

Storytelling Revival: Contributions to a Theoretical Bibliography

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STORYTELLING REVIVAL: CONTRIBUTIONS TO A THEORETICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Instruction manuals

The first and most expressive form of literature dedicated to the practice of storytelling in institutionalised urban environments, that is to say, within the context of storytelling revival movements, can be found in the guise of “instruction manuals” and originates in the Anglo-Saxon educational reform movement and in libraries organising “story time”. The driving forces behind these actions are thus, for the most part, women educators and librarians. A few special lines should be devoted to these authors, given their exceptional nature, not only out of chronological interest – it’s surprising to find such dynamism so early in the history of storytelling revival movements –, but also for the timeless relevance of their deliberations and for their pioneering spirit.

In 1905, Sara Cone Bryant, known in particular for her children’s books, published *How to Tell Stories to Children* (Bryant 1905). There is little biographical information available on the author, but she does herself reveal that her adventure as a storyteller first began when teaching German literature to adult students. It can thus be concluded that she worked first as a teacher and then developed her career as a storyteller in public schools and libraries in

Providence and Boston, as suggested by the acknowledgements appearing in the book's preface. Interestingly, the work was translated and published in France shortly afterwards, in 1911, under the title *Comment Raconter des Histoires à nos Enfants et quelques Histoires Racontées* (Bryant 1911). Nevertheless, it is hard to determine the impact the work may have had. It is a highly comprehensive manual, which opens with a few observations on the figure of the storyteller and the difference between reading out loud and telling a story orally without the use of a book. It makes reference, even then, to a renewed interest in this activity, a consequence, according to the author, of the recognition of its pedagogic effectiveness. Clearly backed by experience, she puts forward a methodology for selecting repertoires, adapting texts, creative processes, while even addressing prosodic and gestural issues. She also suggests exercises to do with children after the stories have been told. It contains, therefore, as is often the case in this kind of manual, a repertoire of thirty-one stories adapted by the author, which includes, among others, folk tales and fables, Bible stories and also tales of Arthurian legend. The suggested repertoire is organised according to level of education: kindergarten and class I; classes II and III; classes IV and V. At the end, the author offers a bibliography of "valuable sources for the storyteller", containing more than fifty publications, including, among others, collections of tales and myths, *One Thousand and One Nights*, Grimm's Fairy Tales and Aesop's Fables. The observations Bryant makes when presenting this bibliography clearly reveals an awareness of the specific characteristics of a performance text as opposed to a literary text: "The books in which the story-teller really finds worthy material are very few; those having the material in a form easily adapted for telling are fewer" (Bryant 1905: 254).

Ten years later, in 1915, Marie Shedlock, an Anglo-French schoolteacher, who had an important influence on American libraries and schools in the early 20th century, published, in

the United States, *The Art of the Storyteller* (Shedlock 1915). Having taught at a state school for girls in London, at the age of 46, Marie Shedlock gave up her profession to devote herself entirely to storytelling. She became known for telling Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales, revealing a style deemed innovative for the period. Augusta Baker wrote about the impact of Shedlock's work in the United States at the time:

Shedlock did not use the affected speech that was in vogue at the time, nor was she didactic. It was her inspiration, as she travelled around the United States telling stories and lecturing on storytelling, that gave impetus to the idea of storytelling as a true art. Shedlock inspired others to become storytellers, among them Anna Cogswell Tyler, Moore's assistant at Pratt, and Ruth Sawyer, one of America's best-known storytellers. After Shedlock's visit to Boston in 1902, regular library story hours were established (Baker e Greene 1977: 9).

The Art of the Storyteller follows the same format as Bryant's manual: a first part dedicated to matters of practice, followed by a repertoire of stories. And, as we have noted with Bryant, behind Shedlock's many reflections there lies actual, established experience. At the beginning of the manual, the author outlines common difficulties in the practice of telling stories, including issues about the story itself, but also performance ones. In this context, and very appropriately, she gives the reader a list of "dangers" that the storyteller faces when telling stories. Some examples are quite enlightening: the danger of adding too many comments or side issues, of establishing interaction through questions, or of gauging the effect of the story through the visible reactions of the audience.

The repertoire suggested contains literary versions from the most varied sources, including European and Asian versions of stories, myths, legends and fairy tales, before ending with three tales by Hans Christian Andersen. Just like Bryant, at the end of her book Shedlock produces an extensive bibliography, organised by source, such as, for example, "Stories from the Fairy Book Series" by Andrew Lang, and by subjects, such as "Stories dealing with the success of the youngest child" (Shedlock 1915: 274-276).

Three years later, American Katherine Dunlap Cather, also a children's author, published *Educating by Story-Telling – Showing the Value of Story-Telling as an Educational Tool for the use of all Workers with Children* (Cather 1918). Despite being less cited in English-speaking studies, with the exception of Simon Hewyood (2001: 235), this work was translated and adapted into Spanish by Eliseo Diego and Maria Teresa Freyre de Andrade (Cather 1963). It was published in Cuba, before becoming a “Bible for Cuban storytellers” (Sanfilippo 2007: 79). While it is difficult to locate any biographical information about the author, the preface of the book reveals that, just as Bryant and Shedlock, she had worked as a storyteller in various contexts:

This book has grown out of years of experience with children of all ages and all classes, and with parents, teachers, librarians, and Sunday School, social centres, and settlement workers. The material comprising it was first used in something like its present form in the University of California Summer Session, 1914, and since then has been the basis of courses given in that institution, as well as in private classes and lecture work (Cather 1918: iii).

In an early part of the book, Cather suggests specific tales according to age, while also suggesting techniques for preparing and telling stories, and includes a bibliography in which the works of Sara Cone Bryant and Marie Shedlock appear, among others. This is a work with explicit and specific pedagogical aims, such as the development of a taste for literature, for music or also for the arts, proposing repertoires and particular techniques for each of these cases. In the second chapter, the author goes on to talk about storytelling as a tool for teaching school subjects, such as history, geography and the sciences, providing stories suitable to the subject matter. Like Bryant and Shedlock, Cather rounds off the work with a list of stories from diverse sources, in which Germanic versions of folktales play a dominant role. The author also published *Story Telling for Teachers of Beginners and Primary Children* (Cather 1921), the official manual of the *Sunday School Council of Evangelical Denominations*, which focuses on

the practical issues of the creative process and of performance, while also outlining strategies for passing on a moral message.

In actual fact, the early decades of the 20th century in the United States of America are marked by the proliferation of manuals of this kind, resulting, without doubt, from the great momentum surrounding oral storytelling within the context of schools and libraries. Other, less cited works include: *The Art of Story-Telling*, by Julia Darrow Cowles (1914), also a children's fiction author, and *Some Great Stories and How to Tell Them*, by Richard Thomas Wyche (1910), one of few male exceptions to the rule. Wyche was also president of the *National Story Teller's League*, founded in 1903 at the University of Tennessee, attesting the growing momentum experienced at the time. Another example of male exceptions in the English-speaking world is Arthur Burrell, who published *A Guide to Storytelling* (Burrell 1926).

Throughout the 20th century, manuals continued to appear in the United States, where these movements can be seen earlier or are more documented. Some of the most widely known works include, among others: *The Way of the Storyteller*, by Ruth Sawyer (1942); *Storytelling: Art and Technique*, by Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene (1977); *The Storyteller's Source Book*, by Margaret Read MacDonald (1982); and also, *Storytelling: Process and Practice*, by Norman Livo and Sandra Rietz (1986).

Although in fewer numbers, you can also find manuals published in South America and in Europe after the Second World War. Examples include *Pues señor... Cómo Debe Contarse el Cuento y Cuentos para Ser Contados*, by Elena Fortún (1991), a Spanish author living in exile in Argentina, where the book was published in 1947, or *Expériences dans l'Art de Raconter des Histoires*, by Jeanne Cappe (1952), published in France. These works stick to the same format as their English-language predecessors, suggesting specific techniques for storytelling and repertoires to suit different age groups. Another example of a male author comes from Brazil,

in the form of pedagogue and mathematician Júlio César de Melo e Sousa, who, in 1957, under the pseudonym Malba Tahan, publishes *A Arte de Ler e Contar Histórias* (Tahan 1957). Following the same format as the manuals, the author suggests a repertoire and provides technical pointers on storytelling, highlighting the pedagogical effectiveness of telling stories in schools.

Despite a few male exceptions, the authors of these first manuals are, as we have seen, primarily women, women teachers and lady librarians. But, as these storytelling revival movements progress and spread, in particular from the 1970s onwards, and manuals of this kind proliferate, the authors and specific characteristics diversify. Ultimately these examples document an activity since the beginning of the 20th century and identify their main contexts: schools and libraries. On the other hand, these extraordinary works reveal the technical issues that these first experiences deemed most relevant, predominated by repertoires of works, their effectiveness and their specific characteristics. Above all else, they claim the relevance of oral storytelling in work with children, highlighting their pedagogical and playful aspects, one of the most important factors in its development and professionalization over the last century.

Nowadays this bibliography is endless and “instruction manuals” actually seem to be the most available and published form of literature about contemporary oral storytelling. Unfortunately, although some of these manuals are serious and professional works, supported by years of experience and thus making available highly relevant concepts and deliberations, the vast majority lack theoretical references and present limiting reflections of little scope.

Theoretical works

After “instruction manuals”, the first theoretical work on the storytelling revival worth looking at is, without doubt, *The World of Storytelling*, by Anne Pellowski (1990), published for the first time 1977. This is probably, and as Patrick Ryan wrote, “the most influential, and well-detailed, popular study describing storytelling” (Ryan 2003: 4).

Having studied Arts and Library Sciences at Columbia University, Pellowski worked at New York Public Library, where she took part in a seminar with Augusta Baker, which led to her interest in oral storytelling (Pellowski 1990: xv). She is also the author of many manuals (Pellowski 1984, 1987, 1995).

In the first part of the book Anne Pellowski seeks to define oral storytelling, giving some historical references dating back to pre-classical examples. Despite being highly informed, from the outset this quest reveals some weaknesses and the examples cited raise some obstacles difficult to get around. The problem, as I see it, lies in the too far-reaching definition of oral storytelling:

The definition of storytelling used here is: the entire context of a moment when oral narration of stories in verse and/or prose, is performed or led by one person before a live audience; the narration may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other accompaniment, and may be learned from oral, printed or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes must be that of entertainment or delight and it must have at least a small element of spontaneity in the performance (Pellowski 1990: 18).

Accordingly, the definition given by Pellowski covers a wide array of art forms, distinct not only for procedures and techniques, but also for cultural and historical contexts. In addition, the author undertakes to classify storytelling types, using seemingly variable criteria, weakening its limits and study. In the case of the first kind of storytelling, which the author refers to as *bardic storytelling*, the definition stems from a performance model in which artists “create and/or perform poetic oral narrations that chronicle events or praise the actions of

illustrious forbears and leaders of a tribal, cultural or national group” (Pellowski 1990: 21). As the author herself recognises, the boundaries between this type and the next, *religious storytelling*, may be tenuous. The definition criteria of this second type of storytelling, unlike the previous one, which is supported on the performance model and on the content of stories, actually concerns the function and context attributed to it. In the words of the author:

Religious storytelling is that storytelling used by official or semi-official functionaries, leaders, and teacher of a religious group to explain or promulgate their religion through stories, rather than exclusively through memorization of laws, scripture, catechism and the like (Pellowski 1990: 44).

The author does not include the telling of religious stories carried out “by ordinary folk in everyday, non-ritualistic situations” (ibidem) in this type, highlighting the criteria of the context in the definition of the following types. As such, *folk storytelling* consists of the practice of telling stories that take place in everyday life, at home, at work, in social or religious gatherings, in the streets or in markets. It should also be kept in mind that in the definition criteria of this type “the persons who told the stories to adults and children were generally not trained in the art, except through practice and imitation” (Pellowski 1990: 66). The classification of the following types (*theatrical storytelling, library and institutional storytelling, camp, park, and playground storytelling*) clearly reveals the contexts defining them. In the case of *theatrical storytelling* the author focuses on international examples, and in particular oriental practices, while in the *library and institutional storytelling* and *camp, park, and playground storytelling* chapters, references concern the contemporary North American situation. The last type, *hygienic and therapeutic storytelling*, is essentially defined by its clear functions and aims.

In the third part of the work, Pellowski turns the spotlight on performance related issues, in a description of models and techniques to be found in varying traditions. She begins with opening formulae, while also including issues related to the creative processes. Then she

analyses matters of style in various traditions, including language procedures, vocal work and models of interaction with the public. She also devotes a chapter to accompanying musical instruments, organised by type: chordophones, idiophones, membranophones and aerophones. She also focuses on props used in different storytelling models, with particular attention to oriental traditions, such as *Kamishibai* or *Rakugo*, while also including storytelling aided by illustrated books, a strong element in contemporary oral storytelling in Europe and the Americas. She ends this part of her work focusing on closing formulae.

In the final part of the book, the author looks at training models, formal or informal, while also spending time on manuals published in English throughout the 20th century and the controversial issue of copyright on so-called traditional stories. She closes this part reflecting on issues of orality, the cultural contextualisation of stories and their publication in collections, before finally defending the universality of the act of telling stories. She also dedicates a short final chapter to list some festivals in the United States, Canada and Europe.

Pellowski's work is without doubt thorough and dedicated, a process presenting a large variety of sources, thus prompting a great deal of relevant reflection. The work, however, displays weaknesses, resulting from the scope of a concept of storytelling that allows the inclusion of very different practices, of particular geographical and cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the categories she proposes become sketchy, with the criteria used in their classification unclear. Be that as it may, she does this with a sensitivity allowing reflection, raising questions about context, function and performance specifics. Above all else, the large amount of information compiled and the many lines of enquiry it offers are of great use in any theorising on the practices of oral storytelling.

Another important US work is *The Storytellers' Journey: An America Revival* by Joseph Sobol (1999). Despite not being explicit in the book, we can conclude that the work results

from the thesis previously presented by the author, *Jonesborough Days: The National Storytelling Festival and the Contemporary Storytelling Revival Movement in America* (Sobol 1994). The work deals exclusively with the storytelling revival in the United States of America, focusing essentially on the history of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling festival, in Jonesborough, created in 1972. Influenced by Joseph Campbell and by Victor Turner, and from a perspective that places his theory among Performance Studies, Sobol analyses the development of the storytelling revival phenomenon and of the creation of the Jonesborough festival by making parallels to what he calls “archetypal myths”:

The Storyteller’s Journey, then, is a mythography, an examination of the uses of myth in an artistic movement whose basic program is the search for myth in a demythologizing time. It examines the stories we have told ourselves over the years to create, shape, and energize a vocational community (Sobol 1999: 15).

Possibly too close to the phenomenon, as can be seen in the quote, and focused on the discourse and imagery of the revival, it might become difficult to follow Sobol’s line of thought when you’re not a “devotee”, a term he uses throughout the work. The recognition of a storyteller archetype, the image fuelling all these discourses, in addition to the analysis made of the careers of the American movement’s artists, recognising in their vocational narratives a motive of serendipity that finds parallels in artists in other places, are seminal to understanding this phenomenon. His analysis of revivalist imagery and of the festival as a ritual experience instrumental in the construction of a community identity is enlightening:

Community, in the storytelling movement, is a term of virtually unchallenged good. It is a key element of the revival dialectic, in which an imagined past is invoked to summon images of a restored future in order to bring hope and fervor to a troubled present (Sobol 1999: 154).

First and foremost a document of the intentions and convictions of those at the heart of the movement in the United States of America, Sobol’s work is primarily a careful and

refreshing analysis of this revivalist phenomenon, enabling the building of bridges with other experiences and understanding the ubiquity of the imagery behind these artistic movements. Ultimately, this is more a history of the American festival from an anthropological perspective than a theory on storytelling performance, but it still makes an invaluable contribution and, as such, is a standout work in the bibliography of this subject.

Moving into the current century, and despite being a work on a smaller scale, we come across another essential title on contemporary oral storytelling: *Storytelling and Theatre: Contemporary Storytellers and their Art*, by Michael Wilson (2006). It is, as its author explains, “unashamedly centred around storytelling in Britain and Ireland” (Wilson 2006: x). In any event, the questions Wilson raises on the controversial relationship between storytelling performance and theatre practices, in particular with respect to the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, are highly useful. Unfortunately, Wilson focuses too much on this relationship and thus disregards any other influences and conditions determining the storytelling revival movements. Nonetheless, he presents a model fundamental to the analysis of storytelling performance – *performance continuum* –, upon which, I hope to one day have the opportunity to devote myself in a future article. Above all else, and going against mainstream thought, Wilson reveals a healthy distrust of these artistic discourses, presenting a concise and solid definition of contemporary oral storytelling and striving to gain an objective understanding of the phenomenon upon which an entire contemporary mythology has been constructed. Finally, he treats us to a cherry on the top of the cake: the preface by Jack Zipes (Wilson 2006: xiv-xviii).

In France, a large number of works have also been published and as in the previous cases, from the hands of the artists themselves. They include, among many others: Bruno de la Salle, fundamental figure in the French movement, who published something of an

autobiography, *Le conteur amoureux* (La Salle 1995), in which some reflections on the craft are joined by selected tales, in addition, more recently, to *Lettres à un Jeune Conteur* (La Salle 2016); Pépito Matéo published a kind of manual entitled *El Narrador Oral y el Imaginario* (Mateo 2005), in which many theoretical questions are broached and reflected on and, more recently, *Des contes à régler – Des régler à conter* (Mateo 2017); Michel Hindenoch published *Conter: un Art?* (Hindenoch 2012), the title of which reflects the central issue of his theory and focuses on practical questions, of translating writing into performance, of the storyteller's presence and *regard*, with particular attention to the matter of voice and of listening.

Turning our attention to Spain, *Palabras de Candil*, an editorial project dedicated to the world of oral contemporary storytelling and of reading mediation, headed by Pep Bruno, has made efforts to publish a theoretical collection in which recognised artists from the field contribute. Translated publications such as that of Pépito Matéo and Bruno de la Salle, already mentioned, and also *Contar con los cuentos* by Estrella Ortiz (2009), *Palabra de Cuentero* by Nicolás Buenaventura Vidal (2010), and *El Anfitrión, el Cocinero y el Arte de contar historias de viva voz* by José Campanari (2013) thus contribute to the theoretical literature of the field of storytelling.

These French and Spanish examples, among others, represent a body of work, which, without doubt, are contributing to the critical mass vital to the theoretical and practical development of contemporary oral storytelling. Very much different in their concerns, in their styles and proposals, they configure a literature essential to reflection on the practice of telling stories. They pull away from the traditional model of "instruction manual" and present themselves as objects of fluid reading, going deeper in their theorising. In any event, they are theories arising from individual practice, seeking to pass on experiences and personal techniques. As such, despite the invaluable usefulness they may have in understanding the

practice, in their teaching and comprehension, their contributions towards a wide-ranging and systemised theory are somewhat limited.

Unfortunately, the novelty of the phenomenon and its marginalisation mean that few theoretical works have been produced. In academic circles, in the European context, only a few solitary research projects, developed in diverse areas, have resulted in doctoral theses. For the most part they strive towards a historical and social representation of the storytelling revival movements in their country or geographical context, or at least put a lot of their energy into this.

In 1998, Maria de Lourdes Patrini presented a thesis to the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* entitled *Le Conteur Contemporain : une étude de la transmission et de la réception orales du conte en France*, published later under the title *Les conteurs se racontent* (Patrini 2011). Focused on the *renouveau du conte* in France, the author uses a methodology established in thorough interviewing and in discourse analysis to portray storytellers and their activity, while giving great importance to the social aspect of the storyteller profession and also reflecting on the relationship between contemporary practice and oral tradition. It is worth highlighting that she didn't just interview artists in the revivalist movement, but also so-called "traditional" storytellers, that is to say, ethnographic informants of studies made in the Auvergne region. She then contextualises and analyses the artistic movement, characterising the contemporary practice as a new phenomenon of the oral tradition, despite recognising that "it is difficult to make out the boundaries of the new style of storytelling modern society demands" (Patrini 2011: 101). Patrini also reflects on the figure of the contemporary storyteller, questioning his practices, contexts and functions. Finally, she turns her thoughts to performance, analysing performances by various storytellers and taking into

account repertoire, use of scenic resources, the relationship between the storyteller and public and prosody. Her work thus draws attention to the central aspect of performance:

The central hypothesis of my research was that performance is a founding element of the oral formula. It is decisive in how efficiently the oral story is transmitted, as this is what allows you to grab the receiver of the oral message (Patrini 2011: 26).

In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, Simon Heywood presented to the University of Sheffield his thesis *Storytelling Revivalism in England and Wales: History, Performance and Interpretation* (Heywood 2001). This work fits, according to the author, into the field of Folklore Studies, as per the English-language name, while its aim is the study of the phenomenon of the storytelling revival in England and Wales, as the title implies.

In his study, Heywood defines the storytelling revival phenomenon as a process, which, despite being decentralised, is aware and programmatic, configuring an artistic movement, or a subculture, within the anthropological meaning. He recognises the key role played by so-called traditional narratives in the imagination of these movements, while arguing that telling wonder tales to adult audiences is a “novelty” of these contemporary movements. The author notes that, within the informal context between adults, and with the exception of epic material in verse and song, repertoires practiced in traditional contexts are shorter in nature, such as life stories, incidents, anecdotes, or urban legends. Heywood thus identifies the clear purpose of these movements of reintroducing wonder tales into contemporary culture, in particular with respect to adults, in two different spheres: on the one hand, a group of professionals and semi-professionals, who work in accordance with a cultural economy; on the other, an informal group of enthusiasts, organised into interest groups.

In what is an essential contribution to understanding the phenomenon, the author describes what he sees as the two guiding lines of these movements: one that promotes the adaptation of narratives from cultures that are distant or in the past, with relation to

contemporary societies; other that advocates the revitalisation of an ancestral art and of a community way of being that has disappeared. According to the author, the coexistence of these discourses creates a blatant paradox, which he summarises in the following words: “as well as being essentially appropriative in method, storytelling movements are apparently reactionary and nostalgic in tone and ideology” (Heywood 2001: 4).

This is how, in a process of self-interpretation and self-representation, the term *revival* enters the vocabulary of participants and enthusiasts, conveying the idea that this practice represents the renaissance of an art that has purportedly disappeared. In this regard, the author recognises “revivalism” as a historical process, the social, political and artistic dynamics of which tend to reject the immediate past in favour of a mythologised former time. This “revivalism” thus encompasses other performing arts, such as music and dance, which throughout the 20th century revealed a new interest for popular and past artistic expressions. And it is in this way that the term “revivalism” is a fundamental concept to understanding the storytelling movements in the most varied locations.

After putting the British phenomenon into historical context, Heywood analyses four ongoing storytelling performance events and, following the model proposed by Dell Hymes (1974, 1975, 1996), focuses on the issues of artistic discourses, of repertoires and of reception, while also analysing conversational situations between practitioners and enthusiasts, in order to recognise shared ideas, convictions and understandings. He briefly addresses the work of the storyteller, focusing on performing techniques, in addition to musical accompaniment and singing. However, the examination here is less detailed, favouring the event at the expense of the poetic aspects of the performance. In the same sense, its study is limited to a very particular event model, which, despite being well established in contemporary oral storytelling circles, merely represents one more of the proposals of this new discipline: a

shared session, with a host introducing the successive storytellers.

Also from the United Kingdom, *The Contemporary Storyteller in Context: A Study of Storytelling in Modern Society* is a doctoral thesis by Patrick Ryan (2003) submitted to the University of Glamorgan. As in the previous case, the author is himself a storyteller, with UK and US backgrounds as his reference. Without spending too much time putting things into context, or on a historical description, Ryan initially questions the artistic discourses of these movements, highlighting the fact that they are essentially founded on “romantic” ideas, while also recognising the need for a theory and for a critical language.

Structuring his thought on the basis of the idea of “text”, the author focuses on various matters of repertoire, and in particular on the cognitive and psychological processes of passing on and enjoying stories, as well as on their influence on the storytelling performance. He also explores the repertoire genres commonly present in the work of storytellers, questioning their oral nature and analysing the influence of literature and film, among others. Here he recognises three sources or genres: personal narratives, literary and traditional texts, and those he refers to as “true traditional and folk narratives” (Ryan 2003: 94). When analysing these “texts”, he also touches on the importance of paratextuality in the act of performing and highlights metanarrative aspects. Ryan also explores the idea of an identity of the artist, central to a model in which the performer, although identifying with the role of storyteller, does not represent a character, rather him or herself. According to the author, if the narrator fulfils this role while telling stories, he/she also does outside the context of performance, insomuch as he/she identifies with a socially recognisable figure: the storyteller. He thus analyses the motivations, discourses and practices of storytellers around this “mega-identity”, as well their construction processes.

Taking the methodology proposed by Tamar Alexander and Michal Govrin (1983), Ryan assesses the three strands making up storytelling performance: the theatrical, the oratorical and the literary. These strands manifest themselves in modes or styles, on the basis of the use of voice, gesture and to the kind of relationship with the audience. According to the author, these modes are, primarily, the consequence of the position of the performer with relation to the narrative, and can be combined: the *storyteller mode*, in which the performer addresses himself/herself directly to the audience; the *synoptic mode*, in which indirect speech is simply used; the *proximate mode*, in which the performer becomes so involved in the story that he/she is compelled to mimic actions and characters, and is able to use direct speech; and the *character mode*, in which the character or the characters of the story are performed. However, despite recognising the centrality of the issues of distance between the narrator and the narrative being represented, Ryan presents these modes as watertight forms, questioning given options on the basis of personal understanding.

The author also dedicates a chapter to matters of reception, taking on the role of active observer. In this regard, he rejects a semiotic reading and instead looks for instruments to analyse the mental processes of participants during the experience of listening to stories:

Genuine storytelling, in essence, exists solely among interactions of teller, listener, text and space, with interaction leading to a qualitative transformation involving all participants' cognition. Transformation, that is, an altered mental state such as liminality, flow and/or storytelling experience, is required if storytelling is truly an art form (Ryan 2003: 150).

Finally, Ryan turns to questions of performing and narrative space. On the one hand he focuses on the concrete spaces of the venues in which performances take place, in addition to their organisation and use by the performer, taking into account aspects of proxemics. On the other hand, he turns his attention to textual and paratextual means of representation, and in particular the cognitive processes of storytellers and listeners.

Ryan's reflection on the discourses and romantic ideas associated with the storytelling revival movements, as well as his progression in the analysis of performance aspects, despite presenting a particular approach, reveal a keen critical awareness and are thus a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, at times the author presents a discourse clearly influenced by convictions of aesthetic grounds, while establishing very subjective criteria of legitimacy, identifying what, for him, is or is not "true" in these practices, as can be seen in the quote above.

Further south, in Europe, another thesis on this subject is *El Renacimiento de la Narración Oral en Italia y España (1985-2005)* by Marina Sanfilippo (2007), submitted to the *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* in 2005, in the Department of Spanish Literature and Theory of Literature, publishing it two years later. Starting with a questionnaire distributed to Spanish and Italian professionals, the author compiles an inventory and a history of the practice of storytelling throughout two decades. First and foremost, she seeks to address important issues, such as the controversial relationship between storytelling performance and the theatre or, also, the differences between the contemporary discipline and what the so-called traditional practices would be. To this end she presents an understanding of orality as a phenomenon separate to writing, which brings oral storytelling closer to other performing arts. The author concludes that:

Oral storytelling is an art form that presents many elements that are also manifested in contemporary theatre, similarly to many scenic manifestation of popular culture, which 20th century figures have recovered and reinstated in cult theatre (Sanfilippo 2007: 67).

In this regard, she seems to see storytelling performance as a new theatrical form, drawing partly on the example of the Italian phenomenon of *teatro di narrazione* and thus getting closer to Michael Wilson's perspective. Sanfilippo also gives us a brief yet informed historical contextualisation, focusing on Europe and Latin America, before then describing the

phenomenon in Spain, elaborating on some of its leading figures, its venues and events. Here she identifies the importance of two factors essential to its development in the early 1990s: the work done by Guadalajara Public Library and the training activities carried out by Francisco Garzón Céspedes. She also explores, using the questionnaires, the training backgrounds of storytellers, levels of commitment, whether they belong, or not, to an association of professionals, the venues and the audiences to whom they perform, the relationship with the repertoire, as well as other questions to do with professionalization, while also including considerations on the limits and specific characteristics of storytelling performance.

With regard to Italy, the author puts the arrival of the storytelling revival into the context of the theatrical realm, accompanying the development of the *teatro di narrazione*, as already mentioned. She thus structures her research into leading figures of this movement, such as Marco Baliani, Marco Paolini and Ascanio Celestini, while focusing on some of their performances, highlighting the political and social discourse present in the work of these artists.

In a final chapter, the author turns her attention, primarily, to the figure of the storyteller, expounding on their specific technical characteristics and observing the representations of “traditional storytellers” present in the work of folklorists, before then, using the questionnaires, focusing on the professional situation of contemporary storytellers. She then devotes her energies to questions of repertoire and categorises two different type of source – traditional and literary –, recognising the specific consequences of these in the performance. With respect to the so-called traditional sources, she analyses, using the questionnaires, the artist’s relationship with their source, the criteria behind selecting a story, as well as their geographical origin. When it comes to literary sources, she comments on the

processes of “oralisation” of the text, focusing on issues related to copyright. In general, she scrutinises the creative processes using analysis of interviews to this end.

Sanfilippo’s work is a fundamental document for understanding the storytelling revival movement in Spain. It is a thorough and informed study, which suggests options for reflection. Unfortunately, as the author admits herself, it is quite unbalanced in its portrayal of the situations of Spain and Italy, given that she dedicates approximately twenty-five pages to the Spanish case and fifty to the Italian. Similarly, the latter is portrayed in greater detail and structured according to artists to whom the author dedicates some attention. Now, the specific phenomenon of *teatro di narrazione* presents traditions, practices and contexts, which, from my point of view, weaken how it fits into a study into storytelling revival movements. This is a structuring option of Sanfilippo’s thesis and seems not to be sufficiently argued despite being explicit:

The paths of this revival have, from the outset, different characteristics in Italy and in Spain, as will be seen later, and this also implies that the studies on the subject don’t have the same proportion in the two countries. In Italy, storytelling is a practice performed by theatre artists, and is, according to some critics, an authentic theatrical genre within contemporary Italian theatre (Sanfilippo 2007: 19).

The consequence of this option is an apparent disconnection between the study of the Spanish situation and the Italian one, presenting different contexts and practices, which the author seems not to be able to make communicate. The linguistic distances, the difference of repertoires, types of events and artistic backgrounds, in addition to the incommunicability of scheduling networks put into doubt, at the end of the day, a joint study on two phenomena, which seem mutually exclusive.

More recently, from the field of sociology, Anne-Sophie Haeringer presented her thesis *Acclimater le Conte sous nos latitudes: une Sociologie Pragmatique du Renouveau du Conte* (Haeringer 2011) at the University of Lyon. To begin with the work focuses on the tale in its

“bibliographic” state, reviewing the different approaches to studying so-called traditional narratives, from Vladimir Propp to Lévi-Strauss, while also highlighting its pertinence as an ethnological object. The author then paves the way for analysing the *renouveau du conte* in France as a process of “acclimatisation” of this textual material, as per the title of the thesis.

In the context of the French phenomenon, the author recognises, in what is a highly valuable contribution, two different attitudes present in the storytelling revival movement: one *etnologisante* [*ethnologizing*] strand, corresponding to a revivalist and utilitarian rationale of oral storytelling practices, and one *esthétisante* [*aestheticizing*] strand, which seeks to affirm the artistic nature of these contemporary practices. She then begins her analysis, approaching oral storytelling as an instrument of “proximity” in the context of a social project of the *Forêt des Contes en Vocance*, dedicated essentially to integrating immigrant communities. In this first case study, the effectiveness of stories and of the act of storytelling in work with the community are under consideration.

All of these elements together make the *Forest of Tales in Vocance*, and more particularly oral storytelling, an excellent instrument for public authorities concerned about the administration of their territories, worried about seeing relations between their inhabitants declining, exile and breaking with identity, insecurity, isolation or rural exodus (Haeringer 2011: 239).

In her second case study, the work of storyteller Jean Pocherot, the author explores a creative process emanating from a repertoire made up of “graphic” texts, analysing the way in which writing and the spoken word, seemingly paradoxical, are combined in a new “acclimatisation”. She also describes and analyses here the event known as *La Nuit des Contes*, fostered by this storyteller and by the *Ateliers de la Rue Raisin*.

The author then turns her attention to oral storytelling as an artistic expression. For this she uses the case of *Labo* of the *Maison du Conte* of Chavilly-Larue. Run by Abbi Patrix, at the time of Haeringer’s study, the *Labo* is a space bringing together storytellers in a joint creative

process, providing an institutional framework as “artists”. Thus in this case oral storytelling is no longer seen as an instrument, nor as a means by which a traditional story is updated, rather art *à part entière*, consequently lifting the practice to the status of art form.

Finally, Haeringer analyses the institutionalisation process of contemporary oral storytelling through a structure working towards its dissemination and promotion, seeking its legitimisation before public authorities. In this regard, her case study is *Mondoral*, a series of activities by the French Ministry of Culture conceived by three creation and scheduling structures: the *Maison du Conte* of Chavilly-Larue, the *Conservatoire Contemporain de Littérature Orale* in Vendôme and the *Centre des Arts du Récit* in Isère.

Anne-Sophie Haeringer’s work is thorough, tackling issues of repertoires, artistic discourse, creative processes, while, given the sociological nature of the approach, making a detailed analysis of the contexts and conditions for the development of oral storytelling in France. In this regard, some aspects of her theory can be easily applied in the analysis of other geographies, raising questions and proposing pertinent analysis methodologies. In the same way, the recognition of *ethnologizing* and *aestheticizing* attitudes and motivations within the storytelling revival movements, differentiating “applied” practice from the “art” form, is a model fundamental for any study on the subject.

Now, if we turn our attention precisely to the applications of oral storytelling, in this case, pedagogical ones, the number of academic works on this phenomenon increases exponentially. In the area of teaching, specifically, we find works such as: *Storytelling in the Classroom: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives Relevant to the Development of Literacy*, by Jean Ferguson Dunning (1999), from the University of London; *Storytelling as a Teaching Strategy in the English Language Classroom in Iceland*, by Patience Adjahoe Karlsson (2012), from the University of Iceland; or *Storytelling Engagement in the Classroom: Observable*

Behavioural Cues of Children's Story Experiences, by Julie Mundy-Taylor (2013), from the University of Newcastle; to name a few examples. Naturally, despite the interest they aroused, the specificities of these works, their goals, methodologies and conclusions did not inform this short report and could well be addressed at a future date.

To conclude, with respect to academic works, we should note the geographical delimitations of their subjects, possibly the natural consequence of a need for methodological restriction. However, this "delimitation", may often be presented as "limitation" because, essentially, they do not take into account the diversity of repertoires, the ways they are performed and the multiplicity of contexts this phenomenon presents, hindering the transposition of concepts and methodologies. It should also be noted that they fit into diverse study areas, presenting different approaches and methodologies and that, maybe for this reason, and with the exception of the British works, are not mutually informing. Maria Patrini's thesis falls within anthropology studies, at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, and was written under the guidance of Nicole Belmont, a leading figure in the study of oral tradition. Simon Heywood and Patrick Ryan also start from very different approaches. For its part, Marina Sanfilippo's research falls under the scope of a department of Spanish literature and theory of literature. As for the work of Anne-Sophie Haeringer, carried out at the Faculty of Anthropology and Sociology of the University of Lyon, this is a study that is openly part of the school of French pragmatic sociology. This is how, actually, with the exception of Patrick Ryan, who often refers to Simon Heywood's thesis, the other works are not interrelated. In Anne-Sophie Haeringer's thesis, even though Maria Patrini's work appears in the bibliography, its influence goes unnoticed. For its part, Marina Sanfilippo refers to none of the other theses.

This diversity reflects the interest that the phenomenon arouses in different disciplines, revealing its trans-disciplinary potential. However, this diversity expresses first and foremost

the theoretical abandonment of these practices. A consequence of this is an absence of shared communication, concepts and analysis models, which, made worse by the linguistic diversity and by the concise geographical delimitation of the phenomena studied, hinders any dialogue.

Collections and Seminar Minutes

In the meantime, throughout the developing storytelling revival, to some extent everywhere, collections on the subject have appeared, with varying academic contribution. Some of these works reveal a trans-disciplinary effort, bringing together in a single work contributions originating from different disciplines. This is the case of *Who Says? Essays on Pivotal Issues in Contemporary Storytelling*, edited by Carol L. Birch and Melissa A. Heckler (1996). This is a collection that, according to the editors, brings together articles by “storytellers, folklorists, anthropologists, and theorists in the fields of literature, communication, education and the performing arts” (Birch and Heckler 1996: 9). This work represents the effort to promote a systematic and trans-disciplinary reflection on contemporary oral storytelling, focusing on questions of repertoire, of the relationship between contemporary practice and oral tradition, as well as on performance aspects. It is worth noting the contribution by Barre Toelken with the article “The Icebergs of Folktale: Misconception, Misuse, Abuse” (Birch and Heckler 1996: 33-63), a detached and critical view of the prejudice and discourse on oral storytelling, which stands out from the rest of the texts.

Another collection with trans-disciplinary intentions is *Dime Cómo Cuentas... Narradores Folklóricos y Narradores Urbanos Profesionales*, coordinated by María Inés Palleiro and Fernando Fischman (2009). With a more pronounced academic dimension, the work focuses on the relationship between contemporary practice and oral tradition in South America. The contributions, essentially from the two coordinators, seek a definition of what they call

narración oral escénica [scenic oral narration] and focus as much on questions of performance as repertoire. In this regard, they analyse the processes of “acclimatisation”, to return to the term of Anne-Sophie Haeringer, within the context of the activity of, in their words, “urban and professional storytellers”.

In another sense, some works compile contributions by storytellers themselves, proposing reflections on the practice, accounts of personal backgrounds, witness accounts of the situation of the country or of the region in which they work. This is the case of Brazilian publications, such as *Contadores de Histórias: Um Exercício para Muitas Vozes*, by Benita Prieto (2011), and *A Arte de Encantar: O Contador Contemporâneo e seus Olhares*, organised by Fabiano Moraes and Lenice Gomes (2012).

Back in France, influential events give rise to the publication of minutes. The first, the conference held at the *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* in 1989, resulted in the publication of *Le Renouveau du Conte – The Revival of Storytelling* under the direction of Geneviève Calame-Griaule (2001). It predominantly relies on the contribution of storytellers to reflect on the nature of the *renouveau du conte* storytelling revival movement, while also pursuing an international image of the phenomenon, and featuring the participation of international artists. The contributions also focus on questions of repertoire, on the social functions of the practice of oral storytelling, as well as on the activity of artists and their different approaches. The second event, *Pourquoi Faut-il Raconter des Histoires?*, organised at the *Théâtre du Rond-Point* in 2004, saw its minutes published in two volumes, under the direction of Bruno de Salle, Michel Jolivet, Henri Touati and Francis Cransac (2005 and 2006), and relied essentially on contributions from artists.

Periodicals

If we were to focus solely on the European context, there would be few magazines dedicated to the subject. In the UK, there are at least two: *Facts & Fiction*¹ and *Storyline*, from the *Society for Storytelling*², the editor of which is, to date, Simon Heywood. In France, one of the most widely circulated magazines is the quarterly *La Grande Oreille*³. In Catalonia the magazine *Tantàgora*⁴, is published weekly in digital format. Also in Spain, AEDA, the association of professionals already mentioned, publishes the magazine *El Aedo*⁵ online. It is hard to track the influence of these publications, but we can assume that their distribution does not go beyond the specific context of their artistic movements and their linguistic barriers.

Conclusion and further bibliography

Finally, I feel bound to mentioning my own thesis, entitled *Narração oral: uma arte performativa* and presented to the *Universidade do Algarve* in 2016 in the area of Culture, Communication and Arts. This reference also serves to allude to other titles that I see as essential in a theoretical bibliography dedicated to storytelling performance.

I sought to provide in this thesis a framework for the study of storytelling performance within the context of artistic studies, especially the performing arts. Addressing the practices of these artists, and focused on the poetic aspects, the primary goal of the thesis was to contribute to an ontology and to an epistemology of contemporary oral storytelling.

¹ <http://www.petecastle.co.uk/fandf/enter.htm> (viewed on April 20, 2018).

² <http://www.sfs.org.uk/storylines> (viewed on March 15, 2016).

³ <http://www.lagrandeoreille.com/> (viewed on April 20, 2018).

⁴ <http://tantagora.net/category/4-edicio/revistes/> (viewed on March 15, 2016).

⁵ <http://narracionoral.es/index.php/es/biblioteca/revista-el-aedo> (viewed on April 20, 2016).

In addition to the titles noted throughout this report, the bibliographical research upon which my research was based has a clearly trans-disciplinary character. To some extent this is due to a perspective that underlies the ontological arguments of contemporary oral storytelling in two essential aspects: the first, the fact that this is a form of expression that arises in performance, alongside, therefore, practices such as dance, circus or theatre; the second, presenting a discourse focused on the voice of an extradiegetic narrator, thus having verbal discourse as the main representation strategy. Taking these two arguments into account, some seminal contributions naturally came from Theatre and Performance Studies through authors such as Peter Brook (1977), Bertolt Brecht (1978, 1994), Peggy Phelan (1993), Robert Abirached (1994), Peter Szondi (2001), Richard Schechner (2003, 2006), Philip Auslander (2003), Erika Fischer-Lichte (2005, 2014), Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), among others.⁶ However, if theatre and performance theory provides analysis concepts and instruments, or if it enables reflection on the role of narration or of the narrator in the performing arts, it is Narratology that provides the essential means to think of the representation strategies focused on the verbal discourse of a storyteller. The contributions of narrative theory thus seem fundamental, such as the works of Gérard Genette (1996, 1980, 1986), Seymour Chatman (1978), Monika Fludernik (1996, 2009), among others.⁷

On the other hand, as this is an artistic movement that seeks much of its repertoire in folktales, a comparative approach would find essential to review the international catalogue of Hans-Jorg Uther (2004), as well as the many national catalogues.⁸ In the same sense, also, studies on so-called traditional narratives, in their many perspectives and subject areas – from the field of literature to folklorist studies, or from anthropology to psychoanalytical

⁶ See Bibliography.

⁷ See Bibliography.

⁸ Idem.

approaches –, can contribute in the analysis of storytelling performance. A thorough presentation is not possible in this report, but I can name some of the authors and the works perused during my research: Alan Dundes (1965), Joseph Campbell (1968), Jack Zipes (1979), Bengt Holbek (1987), Marina Warner (1995), Marie-Louise Von Franz (1995), Isabel Cardigos (1996), Nicole Belmont (1999), Bruno Bettelheim (2010), Ruth B. Bottigheimer (1986), Juan José Ferrer (2013), among others.⁹

Other theories bring to the fore the artistic aspects of orality, such as the seminal works of Roman Jakobson and Pëtr Bogatyrev (1982) or Albert Lord (1960), or in the widespread work of Walter Ong (2002), perspectives that, among others, underpin performance-oriented approaches. Contributions of folklorists such as Richard Bauman (1984, 1986), Ruth Finnegan (1977, 1988, 1992), Linda Dégh (1989; 1995), Paul Zumthor (1990) and Calame-Griaule, Geneviève (1977), among others¹⁰ thus seem fundamental to me.

On our way to a conclusion, it should be noted that the theoretical bibliography presented here has obvious limitations that should be stated for the record. Taking into account the titles arising from the specific context of storytelling revival movements, and to which I first paid attention in this report, it should be noted that the disciplinary diversity prevents a mobility of content through research networks and specialist publications. Secondly, if the geographical diversity of the phenomenon establishes an interesting range of contexts, it also hinders, for reasons to do with distribution networks, knowledge of and access to particular titles. Finally, and no less important, we must acknowledge the linguistic constraints significantly limiting the territory of this research: the languages I was able to focus

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Idem.

on were Portuguese, Spanish, French and English. In short, it would be up to others, I hope, to bring to this work contributions that are absent for the reasons outlined.

In any event, I believe the lack of theoretical production in the area of oral storytelling as a contemporary phenomenon and artistic practice is clear to see. The disciplinary diversity of this bibliography not only reflects a cross-disciplinary nature, but above all else, an absence of shared allegiance, a lack of theoretical edifice, of space within academia, of concepts and specific methodologies.

Indeed, the study of oral performance as contemporary artistic practice is still relegated to the sidelines, an abandonment that allows it to be accepted one moment in the context of folklore studies, the next in theory of literature, and the next in sociology and anthropology, and never in the framework of performing arts, as I have sought to do in the context of my research. On the other hand, the existing reflection is, as can be seen, normally limited to a concise territory, thus highlighting the specific characteristics of its contexts, practices and agents. In this regard, the geographical diversity of the phenomenon, the absence of a common critical language and, finally, the linguistic variety, hinder the transposition of concepts and models of analysis into other situations. It should also be noted that much of this theory has been produced by the artists themselves, which in itself doesn't represent a problem, but reflects the situation of marginalisation of these practices. With very few exceptions, such as those of Anne-Sophie Haeringer (2011), academic interest for the artistic practice of oral storytelling in contemporary societies has yet to go beyond the circles of its practitioners and enthusiasts.

In this regard, I believe we need to acknowledge the urgent need for an inclusive theory that allows us to capture the diversity of the phenomenon and of concepts that enable

communication between these different situations. Indeed, this has been one of the essential questions when reflecting on the subject:

One of the most pivotal issues in storytelling today is how to respect different models in developing a critical language for approaching and assessing contemporary story occasions with widely diverse audiences, tellers, and types of material (Birch e Heckler 1996: 9).

A decade later Marina Sanfilippo also acknowledges the lack of theoretical works, as well as the need to draw on diverse disciplines:

throughout my research I will use the resources offered by literary criticism (in its dual narrative and dramatic aspects), linguistics, communication theory and rhetoric, folklore and ethnology, sociology, etc., in an effort to delimit an object of study such as artistic or literary oral storytelling, which few scholars have approached (Sanfilippo 2007: 16).

Patrick Ryan, for his part, in acknowledging this lack, suggests some of the reasons for it:

The lack of a workable, critical language in contemporary storytelling arises partly because in the past cultural critics ignored storytelling, or took it and its meaning for granted. No language was established to quantify and qualify its development, neither was its history consistently considered or portrayed. Perhaps this was because of its ubiquitous nature, or because rare reports mostly describe it as the activity of women, children, and the elderly: being an activity of the marginalized, storytelling was considered unworthy of serious study (Ryan 2003: 1).

In this quote, Ryan acknowledges the two main obstacles to the legitimisation of oral storytelling, not only as an artistic discipline, but also as an object of study: on the one hand, the ubiquity of the act of telling stories reveals it to the scope of everyday life and presents it as a non-specialist practice; on the other, representation produced by an urban and literate culture, partly inherited from romantic discourses, in preserving prejudice relating to the means and agents of transmission of oral heritage, delay its legitimisation as an object of study.

In this respect, and regardless of its possible causes, the theoretical shortfall within the scope of contemporary oral storytelling practices makes essential the construction of a common and all-encompassing theoretical edifice, with analysis models and a critical language

able to, on the one hand, consider its specific characteristics within performing arts and, on the other, take on board its diversity of contexts, agents and ways it can be done.

Luís Correia Carmelo
Faro, 20th March 2018

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