

REMARKS ON THE HISTORIC-GEOGRAPHIC METHOD AND STRUCTURALISM IN FOLKLORE STUDIES: THE PUZZLE OF CHAIN LETTERS

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ABSTRACT

Structuralism in folklore studies was in many ways a reaction against the previous scholarship and the historic-geographic method in particular. In this paper the relationship between the two is analysed through a comparison between Walter Anderson's historic-geographic and Alan Dundes' structuralist treatment of chain letters. Anderson published his article on types of Estonian chain letters in 1937, whereas Dundes dealt with chain letters repeatedly in the 1960–70s. Drawing on T. Kuhn's concept of paradigm as a "way of seeing the world", the article examines the concept of folklore and folklore studies proposed by either scholar in his discussion of chain letters and seeks to interpret his reasons for taking interest in such a phenomenon. It argues that rather than being incommensurable, the historic-geographic method and structuralism as represented by Anderson and Dundes share an understanding of folklore as a collection of classifiable single items characterised by simultaneous variation and stability.

KEYWORDS: history of folkloristics • historic-geographic method • structuralism • chain letters • paradigms

The present article connects chain letters and the history of folklore studies – a somewhat unusual combination that nevertheless seems to offer several interesting points for discussion. Most readers presumably have some sort of personal experience of chain letters, either from childhood or, in more recent years, from using e-mail. Despite this, an outline of chain letters might still prove useful to start with. A chain letter tells its receiver to copy the letter a given number of times and to forward these copies to the same number of people; the continuation of the chain in this specific manner, as dictated by the letter, is claimed to have a positive outcome, whereas the breaking of the chain is bound to cause trouble. To convince their readers, chain letters often include allegedly true stories about the good luck attending those who obediently continued the chain, as well as citing the misfortunes afflicting those disobeying the letter's instructions. In addition, some chain letters might end with a list of its previous senders that the new receiver is expected to supplement with his or her name and place of residence.

By an interesting though probably random coincidence, chain letters attracted the attention of two significant folklorists of the 20th century – Walter Anderson (1885–1962) and Alan Dundes (1932–2005). While Anderson was a dedicated and loyal adherent of the historic-geographic method, its "last defence counsel" (Kuusi 1980: 25), Dundes, on

the other hand, from the 1960s onwards programmatically introduced structuralism and psychoanalysis into folklore studies. Anderson became interested in chain letters during the 1930s when he was working as Professor of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, Estonia. In 1937 he presented a paper on chain letters at the 3rd Congress of the International Association for European Ethnology and Folklore held in Edinburgh (Tuneld 1978: 68) and in the same year published an article introducing types of chain letters he had found in Estonia (Anderson 1937). Alan Dundes first discussed chain letters in 1966 in an article titled "Chain letters: A Folk Geometric Progression" and later returned to them in relation to photocopied and office folklore (Dundes, Pagter 1975; Dundes 1983).

Anderson's historic-geographic and Dundes' structuralist treatment of chain letters form an interesting pair that enables to follow and discuss methodological changes in folklore scholarship from the 1930s to 1970s. Relying on Thomas Kuhn (1970), the historic-geographic method and structuralism could be regarded as successive research paradigms that represent a particular way of "seeing" folklore and studying it. Kuhn launched the concept of paradigm in his 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* where he argued against the deep-rooted positivist definition of science as a process of accumulating facts, theories, and methods and moving towards an objective and fixed truth. Relying on examples drawn mostly from the history of physics, Kuhn instead conceptualised science in terms of the recurrent structure of its developmental pattern: successive transitions from one paradigm to another via crisis and scientific revolution. Scientific revolutions as interruptions and radical changes in the ways of doing research introduce new theories, concepts, and questions, while at the same time placing old ones into a new context. In Kuhn's terms, this results in the incommensurability of succeeding paradigms, in miscommunication between followers of different paradigms and, at the revolutionary conjuncture – scholars working within different paradigms "see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction" (ibid.: 150) because they see these things "in different relation to one another" (ibid.).

Structuralism as propagated by Dundes was meant as such a different way of seeing and studying folklore, as a critical response to previous methods and the historic-geographic method in particular. In the following, I will analyse Anderson's historic-geographic and Dundes' structuralist treatment of chain letters in order to compare their notions of folklore and folklore research. Though Kuhn aimed at criticising positivist understanding of development of science, I will argue that his concept of paradigm continues to be useful for thinking about those methods of folklore research that have been modeled after the scientific ideals of objectivity, verifiability, and exhaustibility. Also, that paradigms as "ways of seeing the world" can be detached from particular phases in the research history and used to discuss the underlying premises shared by different approaches, in this case the historic-geographic method and structuralism. This latter revision has been recently proposed also by Pertti Anttonen who calls for regarding paradigms not as "research trends or their developments, but fundamental premises in theorisation and in methodology" (Anttonen 2007: 17–18).

THE HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF CHAIN LETTERS

Folkloristics as a science of origin

The historic-geographic method was developed by Nordic researchers in the 1870-80s, with the leading role taken by Finnish scholars, father and son Julius and Kaarle Krohn in particular. Therefore the method is also known as the Finnish method or, alternatively, the geographical-historical method or, in more general terms, the comparative method. In the first decades of the 20th century it enjoyed an almost unparalleled success, as Bengt Holbek put it (Holbek 1992: 4), explainable, among other things, by its internal consistency and an effective combination of both established and novel ideas and fields. According to Matti Kuusi (1980: 25), the method synthesised the premises and practices of philological text criticism and comparative linguistics with impulses drawn from the theory of evolution and with observations about the geographical distribution of folklore. Owing to these components, the historic-geographic method succeeded in fulfilling the positivist criteria prevailing in contemporary science (Hautala 1954: 174), while at the same time providing assistance in the establishment of distinctive national cultures, a project so many European regions were engaged in at the time.

As indicated in its name, the historic-geographic method approached folklore from the point of view of its history and geographic distribution, i.e. the spatial and temporal origins of folklore. In compliance with the historical perspective of the 19th century, the focus of the historic-geographic method was on the past. Folklore was tied up with the traditional, with an oral culture regarded as static and vanishing, and thus contrasted with civilisation and literacy, with modern urban culture. The creation of folklore was explained by monogenesis and its distribution by diffusion. This meant that each fairy tale or folk song was claimed to have been created at a certain time and in a certain place as a unique artistic whole that in the course of time had spread out by means of loans, and in such a way that at each successive geographical juncture a new variant of the original form was created on the basis of previous ones. All variants of the same original song or tale were therefore seen as related and as representing the same type that was manifested in their common content (see e.g. Aarne 1913; Krohn 1926; Kuusi 1980; Holbek 1992; Anttonen 1997; Virtanen 1997).

Proceeding from these premises, the task and goal of folklore studies was to trace the origins of each given folklore item – by means of detailed comparison of its variants to map its trajectory, pinpoint the time and place of its creation as well as its approximate original form or the archetype, *Urform*. The quality of conclusions arrived at, their accuracy, objectivity and testability, was proportionally related to the quantity of empirical data, to the amount of folklore texts at the scholar's disposal. According to the positivist ideals of the era, "scientificness" depended on objectivity and controllability, with analysis proceeding strictly from consideration of the empirical data. By fulfilling these criteria, the historic-geographic method provided a framework for dealing with folklore and with topical questions of origin and the originality of cultures in purely scientific terms. The conviction of the followers of the method of its correctness is vividly expressed in the following bold statement made by Walter Anderson in 1923: "Where the influence of the Finnish method's "school" has not yet penetrated, the study of folklore still spins in a vicious circle and gives birth to nothing but light-headed and fantastic hypotheses" (Anderson 1923b: 197).

Anderson's approach to Estonian chain letters is in strict accordance with the premises and prescriptions of the historic-geographical method. However, he applies the method with a silent obviousness as if there was no need for an introduction to its principles. With the motives behind the article left equally implicit, readers "naturally" find themselves amongst types, variants, and other key concepts of the historic-geographic method. Analysis is based upon chain-letter texts collected by Anderson himself and those found in the collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives, but he also draws upon material published in both the Estonian press and international folkloristic publications. Striving for an ultimately exhaustive data collection, Anderson includes texts in Estonian and German as well as in English, Russian and French. While this multilingual data illustrates Anderson's good command of foreign languages, it is also a telling example of the international reach of the historic-geographical method: the spatial borders of the analysis were to be determined by the empirical data itself.

Anderson spares his readers from the stage of typologically sorting his material, and gets straight to the "types of chain letter acknowledged in Estonia so far" (Anderson 1937: 23). This manner of presentation makes chain letter types appear as natural phenomena, self-sufficient real entities, which is an implicit prerequisite for their objective detection. If possible, Anderson tries to pick out redactions, i.e. deviations from the original form that within a certain territory or period of time have developed into new standards. Going through one type after another, Anderson compares variants with each other, traces their genetic relations and maps diffusion in order to come up with conclusions and suggestions about their time and place of creation and approximate original form. Since each chain letter constitutes a concrete, even tangible object, it seems possible to collect and analyse them with minimal "human interference", at least when compared to folklore texts written down from word of mouth. Furthermore, since accuracy in copying the letter is one of the prerequisites of the letter's magical power, chain letters by their very nature contribute to the scholarly task of reconstructing the original form. Similarly, lists of previous chain letter senders sometimes added to the bottom of the letter seem to give written evidence of the letter's historical and geographical routes. Although Anderson is doubtful about Bernard Shaw's, Walter Scott's and Henry Ford's participation in chain letters (1937: 16), he nevertheless relies on the names of persons and places cited in these lists.

Looked at from this perspective, chain letters seem to fit perfectly within the premises and practices of the historic-geographical method, and by their characteristics to lend those practices empirical justification. Although Anderson's discussions and conclusions conscientiously derive from the empirical data at his disposal, he at times moves on to an abstract level beyond the specificities of time, language and place. Crossing language and state borders, chain letters represent for Anderson a truly international phenomenon: types of chain letter found in Estonia belong to the international chain letter pool, thus embodying the international contacts of Estonians, their participation in the international folklore exchange.

Anderson treats chain letters as a peculiar subclass or epiphenomenon of *Himmelsbriefe*. *Himmelsbrief* or “letter from heaven” – that is, a letter claimed to have been written by God or Jesus and thereby possessing the power of protecting its owner from fire, death, bullets, illnesses and other misfortune (Stübe 1931/1932b). Though *Himmelsbriefe* have been dated as far as to the 6th century, in the Baltic region, for instance, their popularity reached its peak in the 19th century, particularly in relation to the Moravian Church (Pöldmäe 1938: 530). Consisting of Christian edification and admonitions, *Himmelsbriefe* often stress the duty to keep the Sabbath; promise salvation for piety and threaten those living in sin. According to Anderson’s definition, chain letters differ from “the usual *Himmelsbriefe* firstly in their brevity and secondly in that the appeal to distribute the letter and to lend it for rewriting has been transformed into a strict instruction to copy the letter nine times (three times, four times) in a short period of time and to send it to the same number of acquaintances; if the addressee of the letter does so, luck will attend him, if not – misfortune” (Anderson 1937: 1).

Anderson’s way of describing chain letters through letters from heaven indicates that at the time he wrote his article, in the 1930s, scholars of folklore could be expected to be so familiar with *Himmelsbriefe* as not to need further explanations: *Himmelsbriefe* were a standard and chain letters a novel exception to it. Anderson’s method of defining chain letters can be said to be in line with and explainable by the historical perspective of the historic-geographic approach: while the method aimed at reconstructing textual histories and detecting origins of folklore, Anderson conceptualises chain letters as *direct descendants* of *Himmelsbriefe*, thus referring to their origin. Describing a genre means locating it in the field of already existing genres through discussion of intragenetic historical developments. From one genre another one can spring that will be defined through features distinguishing it from the original phenomenon. Anderson does not, however, look for reasons that have led to the development of chain letters, nor is he interested in transformations chain letters might have caused in the *Himmelsbrief* tradition. What seems to be of crucial importance for him, is the fact of continuity per se, the relatedness of chain letters to letters from heaven. It is as if genres and subgenres formed a chronological system of genetic relations, a kind of family tree of genres that grows independently of the tradition-carriers’ actual practices.

Motives behind interest in chain letters

Anderson expects his readers to be familiar with “the nature and character” (Anderson 1937: 1) of *Himmelsbriefe*. However, it is more than doubtful that this link between *Himmelsbriefe* and chain letters mattered at all to the senders and receivers of the very chain letters he analysed. Motives for distributing chain letters remain outside Anderson’s sphere of interest and he also seems to avoid delivering judgments on those participating in forwarding chain letters. One can nevertheless find one telling footnote in his article where he claims that the names of well-known persons in lists of chain letter senders could have been added without their knowledge. In Anderson’s words, these celebrities thus “utterly innocently figure as spreaders of chain letters. Other “promi-

ment" addressees, however, could have really played along, though not out of superstition, but just for fun!" (ibid.: 6). Anderson's remarks reflect a condescending attitude towards the distribution of chain letters. He basically excludes the possibility that politicians, writers, famous actors and other celebrities – members of the public elite – could earnestly pass on chain letters or act superstitiously. Relegated to a footnote, these statements hardly bear any analytic meaning, but vividly reflect accepted interrelationships between class, education and rationality.

Drawing together his article, Anderson refers to the possibility of other types of chain letters circulating in Estonia and asks his readers for additional materials to be sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives. Similar calls for help can be found in the concluding remarks of Anderson's other studies (e.g. Anderson 1925–1926), stressing the ever-adjustable nature of scientific truth and thus the continuous progress of research (e.g. Anderson 1935: 10–11; Kuusi 1980: 66). Since new empirical data might prove previous conclusions wrong, results of even the most detailed studies are bound to remain inconclusive. This ideal of delving ever deeper into ever-narrower questions is in Kuhn's view typical of normal science, enabling it to increase its accuracy and better match empirical data with theoretical premises. Paradigm-based puzzles are directed at strengthening the position of the paradigm, while at the same time testing its borders and capacity. Of different scope and nature, these puzzles set different aims: the purpose of Anderson's *Kaiser und Abt*, for instance, as well as of his other monographs handling huge arrays of texts, could be said to be to immortalise the historic-geographic method and give fundamental evidence of its reliability, while shorter articles on various topics, on the other hand, contribute to broadening the territory of the paradigm and thus also the discipline. The article on chain letters could be regarded precisely as such a small-scale endeavour, aimed at extending the reach of both the historic-geographical method and folkloristics.

Fixed and fluid borders of folklore

As was mentioned above, one of the components of the historic-geographic method was the cultural-evolutionary idea of all cultures being destined to experience the same universal process. Orality and literacy were seen as two distinct and mutually exclusive developmental stages; tradition, along with folklore, was tied to oral culture, and destined to vanish with the progress of civilisation (e.g. Anttonen 2005: 48–51). In line with these ideas, Anderson claimed, for instance, that the routes of folklore's diffusion coincide with the "general routes of culture" (Anderson 1923a: 408), meaning routes of colonisation: folklore, like all culture, can spread only from highly-developed cultures to those still on a lower level of development, from colonisers to the colonised (ibid.: 408–410).

At the same time Anderson regarded himself as one of the few members of the historic-geographic community who stressed the relativity of the borders between the written and the oral. Drawing attention to the fact that literary stories influenced oral ones, and vice versa, Anderson demanded that each case be treated separately and in strict accordance with the empirical data (Anderson 1923a: 4, 11; 1930/1933; 1935: 45–46). He knew his viewpoint in this respect to be an exceptional one, and even referred to himself as the first folklorist to have drawn attention to this fluidity of borders (Ander-

son 1923a: 411). Judging from these statements, one could conclude that for Anderson orality and literacy indeed existed side by side in a constant interrelationship, rather than marking distinct phases of cultural evolution. This in turn allows of a further suggestion that Anderson did not necessarily equate orality with illiteracy and a lower level of cultural development. Furthermore, his interest in chain letters as well as in rumours (Anderson 1925–1926) seems to indicate that he regarded neither tradition nor folklore as exclusively involved with the past, with everything destined to vanish in the progress of civilisation. Treating as folklore phenomena to be found in cities and amongst literate and educated people in the contemporary urban environment, Anderson referred to the vital presence and functioning of folklore in modern daily life (see also Seljamaa 2005, esp. 162–163). While it would be exaggerating to read into these references an intention to consciously propose a broader concept of folklore, it nevertheless illustrates Anderson’s creative approach to folklore, as well as the feasibility of studying such phenomena in the framework of the historic-geographic method.

PATTERNS OF CHAIN LETTERS AND OF CULTURE

The new science of folklore

In 1928, a few years after Anderson’s monograph *Kaiser und Abt* was issued, Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp published his *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1968). Starting from a synchronic perspective instead of a historical one, Propp aimed at laying bare the form of folktales – their “component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole” (Propp 1968: 19). In Propp’s view it was the form of tales and not their content that enabled folklorists to describe folktales accurately, which in turn was a prerequisite for a systematic classification of folktales. Thus, it was not just the perspective and approach that were new, but, compared to the goals set by the historic-geographic method, the whole need for formulating adequate genre definitions and classifications that seemed so novel. Propp regarded both accurate definitions and classifications as hallmarks of science so that lacking them, folklore studies lacked scientific status. Commenting on the state of affairs in folkloristics, Propp wrote: “At a time when the physical and mathematical sciences possess well-ordered classification, a unified terminology adopted by special conferences, and a methodology improved upon by the transmission from teachers to students, we have nothing comparable” (ibid.: 4).

Over thirty years later, around the time when Propp’s work appeared in English for the first time, Alan Dundes expressed similar critical concerns about the theoretical backlog of folklore studies and the indefiniteness of its terminology, which he viewed as hindering the further development of the discipline. In several articles published during the 1960s, Dundes indignantly drew attention to the fact that “thus far in the illustrious history of the discipline, not so much as one genre has been completely defined” (e.g. Dundes 1980: 21) and that the meanings of several other key concepts were equally vague (ibid.; see also Dundes 1975c: 104; 1975e: 88). In Dundes’ opinion, it was clearly time for a change, a scientific revolution that would transform folklore studies into a social science instead of (or as well as) a historical one (see e.g. Dundes 1975a: 16). In the concluding chapter of his 1964 monograph on the morphology of North Ameri-

can Indian folktales, Dundes sharply contrasted previous folklore studies with a “new science of folklore” (Dundes 1964: 112). While the former method dealt with questions of the origin and historical development of folklore items, the primary need of the new approach was the “descriptive structural analysis of all the genres of folklore” (ibid.). Dundes (1964: 38) thereby stated that “the reason why folklorists should adopt a pattern approach to folklore is *not* simply because the approach has been successfully utilized in other disciplines, but rather because of the nature of folkloristic materials, that is, because the materials of folklore are *structured* and *patterned*” – a claim convincingly illustrating Kuhn’s concept of paradigm as a way of seeing the world. Dundes further declared that “the new science of folklore must include synchronic structural analysis which will lead to the formulation of accurate definitions of the materials of folklore, definitions based upon formal morphological features” (Dundes 1964: 112).

Towards a definition of folklore

In the 1960s and 1970s Dundes seems to have been systematically carrying out this very same new science by means of publishing a series of articles dedicated to structural analysis of various single folklore phenomena. In addition to folktales, he described the structure of riddles (Dundes 1975b) and proverbs (Dundes 1975c) as well as that of games (Dundes 1975d), superstitions (Dundes 1975e), and chain letters. The guiding principle of these various pieces, a key to their unity, seems to be expressed in the following vehement programmatic statement from 1964: “Folklore, as a discipline, will never be adequately defined unless or until all the various genres or forms of folklore are rigorously described” (Dundes 1980: 20). Approached from this angle, Dundes’ definitions of single genres figure as parts of a more extensive and ambiguous project of (re)defining the whole field of folkloristics. Based on *internal* criteria, i.e. structure, rather than origin, orality or other criteria *external* to folklore materials, the genre definitions provided by Dundes were claimed to be objective and adjustable. Folklorist had to penetrate the phenomenon at issue and discover its intrinsic pattern, differentiating it from other items with possibly the same external features. Structural analysis also seemed promising because structures could be discovered and described without having to wade through enormous, yet forever incomplete, folklore collections, thus enabling scholars to proceed more quickly (see e.g. Dundes 1976: 81–82).

However, the “descriptive analysis of all the genres of folklore” was but the initial task of the new science of folklore, a prerequisite for moving on to a more holistic description of cultures. In his preface to the second English edition of Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1968, Dundes differentiated Propp’s syntagmatic and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ paradigmatic structure, explaining the defects of the former: “Propp’s syntagmatic approach has unfortunately dealt with the structure of text alone, just as literary folklorists generally have considered text in isolation from its social and cultural context. In this sense, pure formalistic structural analysis is probably every bit as sterile as motif-hunting and word-counting” (Dundes 1968: xii). Forms of folklore had to be related to culture as a whole in order to reach more general patterns lying beneath the surface, models of social situations inherent in folklore (ibid.: xiii; see also Dundes 1976: 89–90).

Case study: chain letters

Approached in the light of these statements and aims, Dundes' 1966 article "Chain Letter: A Folk Geometric Progression" constitutes an attempt to subject yet another folklore form to the new science of folklore, thereby moving one step forward towards an adequate definition of folklore as a discipline. As cited by Michael J. Preston, Dundes arrives in his article at the following definition of chain letters: "(1) 'there is a statement proclaiming that the letter is a chain letter,' (2) there is 'the injunction or order to send copies of the letter to a specific number of friends or acquaintances, sometimes within a definite period of time,' (3) there is usually a detailed description of 'the desirable consequences which will occur if the receiver of the letter complies with the terms of the injunction' and (4) there is typically 'a warning in the form of a statement of the one or more undesirable consequences which will result if the injunction is ignored or disobeyed'" (Preston 1976: 1).

Commenting upon Dundes' definition, Preston adds, that "Dundes' outline of the structure of chain letter is, on the whole, adequate, but a close look at a number of chain letters reveals a need for some modification, particularly when one considers the variety of chain letters and the differing motives of those who take part in their circulation" (Preston 1976: 1). Preston's assessment is of interest, even intriguing, because it gives an opportunity to test Dundes' own claims about the empirical verifiability of structural analysis (Dundes 1976: 77). This verifiability, in turn, gave rise to the hope that "(i)deally, each succeeding generation of structural folklorists will substitute a more accurate and refined version of structural analysis for any given genre, with each new analysis coming ever closer to describing the underlying structural pattern" (ibid.: 78).

Preston's analysis of chain letters, published ten years after Dundes' article, could be regarded as such a new analysis, and at first sight his arguments indeed seem to lead towards a more accurate and refined analysis. Yet both of his arguments, the variety of chain letters and the different reasons for circulating them, refer to criteria *external* to the materials of folklore, which, according to Dundes (1976: 77; 1980: 21), cannot materially contribute to defining folklore. Discussing fallacies in definitions of superstition, Dundes for instance claimed that "(t)he arbitrariness and relativity of opinion or belief make it of dubious value for purposes of defining. Moreover the explanation of the original cause of an object does not necessarily explain what that object is" (Dundes 1975: 89). It could thus be concluded that explanations of objects themselves derive precisely from reducing the labyrinth of multiformity to uniformity (see also Propp 1968: xxv). Once out of the labyrinth and ready for paradigmatic interpretations, the empirical verifiability of structural descriptions seems secondary: "Clearly, structural analysis is not an end in itself! Rather it is a beginning, not an end" (Dundes 1968: xii).

Case study: photocopied folklore

Attempts to introduce new methodology were inseparable from aspirations to re-conceptualise the whole field of folklore. In 1975 Dundes, together with Carl R. Pagter, published a collection of photocopied folklore titled *Work Hard and You Shall be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire*, followed by several sequels (Dundes, Pagter

1987, 1991). The book could be described as an anthology that, by means of introducing one phenomenon of contemporary folklore, aims at undermining stereotypes about folk and lore as peasant matters belonging to the past. Consisting of thematically-grouped examples and their short descriptive analyses, the collection avoids arcane methodological and theoretical discussions, and addresses a wider audience than the narrow circle of folklorists. Despite its popular tone – or, precisely due to it – the book fits in with the same project of new science and raises interesting questions.

The introduction to the collection proceeds from criticism of the “folklorists’ overly narrow definition of both “folk” and “lore”” (Dundes, Pagter 1975: xiii) which Dundes and Pagter contrast with their “modern definitions”. Defining “folk as any group whatsoever that shares at least one common factor – language, occupation, religion, ethnicity” (ibid.: xiii) they “allow for the possibility of considering urban people as a folk bound together by the mutuality of the unhappy experiences in battling “the system,” whether that system be the machinery of government or the maze where one works” (ibid.: xix). By liberating the folk from the “illiteracy” criterion, Dundes and Pagter at the same time liberate lore from the “oral transmission” criterion, thus declaring the possibility of “urban folklore”. By doing so, they tie the concept of folklore to the concept of tradition, which they in turn explain as “multiple existence”: the photocopied items included in the book “are traditional insofar as they manifest multiple existence, one of the principal characteristics of a folklore form. These items exist in multiple versions and in more than one time or place – *just as all folklore does*” (ibid.: xvii; – my italics, E.-H.S.). Another indicator of folklore they mention is variation, which they explain as follows: “As an item moves from person to person, change is almost inevitable. Each person (and ultimately each society) makes the item of folklore his own by consciously or unconsciously placing his personal interpretative stamp upon it” (ibid.). Having in this way equated folklore with tradition and the latter in turn with multiple existence and variation, Dundes and Pagter arrive at the conclusion that “the materials contained in this study are traditional [i.e. folklore]: they manifest multiple existence in space and time, and they exist in variant forms” (ibid.)

Although meant and presented as a radically new approach to conceptualising folklore, the criteria Dundes and Pagter apply in claiming the folklore-ness of xeroxlore are basically the same as those inherent in the premises of the historic-geographic method. Variation presupposes a static core or essence in relation to which alterations occur and become observable. Similarly, only things essentially the same can be attributed a multiple existence, simultaneous plural occurrence. Furthermore, both multiple existence and variation comprise the idea of diffusion of folklore, and thus of folklore items as objective entities passed on and modified during this process. Thus, Dundes and Pagter interpret folklore on the grounds of very much the same premises as did Anderson for example, conceptualising it as consisting of various single items that despite constant variation are capable of maintaining their integrity. Traditionality derives from the continuity of these items through various versions through time and space, from their static nature. Characterising chain letters, Dundes and Pagter work within this same logic of continuity by subsuming chain letters under the title or category of “Traditional letters”. By this they “mean letters that are relatively fixed in both form and content” (Dundes, Pagter 1975: 3). Chain letters, according to them, are as a matter of fact “one of the most common types of the tradition letter” (ibid.).

In contrast to Dundes' programmatic single-genre articles referred to above, in this collection structuralism is applied implicitly, with the same silent obviousness characteristic of Anderson's use of the historic-geographic method. In their discussion of chain letters, Dundes and Pagter could be said to be formulating two different definitions. The first originates in the chain metaphor, thus creating a kind of visual image of the letters' logic or outcome: "The true chain letter is an attempt to form a human chain of communication that increases in a geometric progression as each individual recopies the single chain letter he has received and sends the five to twenty copies on to individuals he knows. Often there is an incentive, such as money, liquor, or good luck, to encourage the receiver of the letter to continue the chain" (Dundes, Pagter 1975: 4). This is followed by a second definition, a delineation of the underlying structure of chain letters that repeats the definition presented by Dundes in 1966 and cited above. Both definitions evince a synchronic perspective and focus on chain letters *per se*, without linking them to previous similar phenomena. However, it is interesting, that in a footnote Dundes and Pagter (*ibid.*) nevertheless refer to *Himmelsbriefe* as another category of traditional letters, but without further comments on their relation to chain letters.

As regards defining chain letters, Dundes' and Pagter's concept of "true chain letters" is of similar interest, especially since they exemplify true chain letters with a chain-letter text basically coinciding with the ones analysed by Walter Anderson in the 1930s. This allows for the conclusion that "trueness" of folklore in their interpretation is a quality equated with traditionality and that therefore, in order to be described as true, folklore items must have a long continuum of fixed form and content. Furthermore: "even though the letters are typewritten, the variations are very much like those occurring in items transmitted orally" (*ibid.*: 5). This resemblance of written to oral variation gives support to the folkloreness of chain letters while at the same time confirming that the folkloreness of folklore lies precisely in its simultaneous variation and stability – a special characteristic of folklore that Anderson emphasised and sought to explain by means of his Law of Self-Correction (Seljamaa 2007).

In order for the term "true" chain letters to make sense, there have to be chain letters that are somewhat less true or, in other words, in some respect different from the true letters. Dundes and Pagter, for instance, treat separately chain letters described as "parodies on the normal chain letter" (Dundes, Pagter 1975: 6). In addition, they point out chain letters allegedly started in order to collect money for charity or express public opinion on some other burning issue. For instance, discussing a chain letter protesting against racism, they start with the following statement: "here we have a striking case of how such an apparently trivial folklore form as the chain letter can suddenly become a dynamic force for social protest and political concern. Certainly, this example differs markedly from those chain letters in which one attempts to receive (...) picture postcards. Here emphasis is upon giving, and upon providing a channel for the expression of outrage at a tragic racial assassination" (*ibid.*: 8).

This intrageneric differentiation between normal and abnormal or unusual chain letters draws attention once again to criteria regarded as relevant for defining folklore. As Dundes himself repeatedly stated, genre definitions should be based on internal factors – as demonstrated by his definition of chain letters. However, his concept of *true* chain

letters significantly relies on the motives behind distributing chain letters, which in a strict sense belongs to factors external to the texts themselves. One might thus suggest that while internal features enable us to distinguish one genre from another, external factors are needed to describe variations within a genre, amongst phenomena with the same internal qualities. Accordingly, the underlying structure is stable and remains the same in contrast to alterations taking place on the level of external factors. It thus seems as if for Dundes and Pagter true chain letters made up the core of the chain-letter tradition, and other kinds of chain letters accordingly represented variations of this core.

In defining chain letters, Dundes and Pagter apply a syntagmatic approach. However, commenting on the context of specific texts, they implicitly move on to the paradigmatic level and look for links between the empirical structure of chain letters and the American culture: "in a way, one could argue that the chain letter tradition reflects on the major patterns of achieving success in American culture. Do what you're told, conform, and there will be a payoff for you. The chain-letter instructions suggest that one must do what one is told by an external force. If one obeys, one is rewarded. If one bucks the system, one will not be rewarded and may be punished" (ibid.: 4). Accordingly, the chain-letter parodies ridicule the very same major patterns and values that the "true chain letters" are based on, making fun of taboos and bringing to light suppressed sexual fantasies. Just as in the case of structure, the underlying cultural patterns are the same, but enable the sender to set different goals and express varying opinions. Formal uniformity can tolerate a multiplicity of motivations and positions, thus reminding one of the contextuality of folklore, its belonging to a greater whole.

Chain letters in the chain of tradition

Linda Dégh refers to Dundes' discussion of chain letters in her monograph *Legend and Belief* where she treats chain letters as a subtype of luck legends (Dégh 2001: 189). A vivid example of the inspiring effect of Dundes' and Pagter's treatment of photocopied folklore is Mihály Hoppál's article titled "Chain letter: contemporary folklore and the chain of tradition" published in 1986 (Hoppál 1986). Following in the footsteps of his American colleagues, Hoppál uses photocopied chain letters to detect cultural patterns and to discuss problems of folklore theory. By posing the question "is the mimeographed letter folklore?" (Hoppál 1986: 63), Hoppál expresses the same need to reconsider the concepts of folk and lore dealt with by Dundes and Pagter ten years earlier. Summarily taking over their definition of folk as any group sharing one common factor (ibid.: 75), Hoppál additionally looks for links uniting present folklore with phenomena of the past. Like Dundes and Pagter, he regards variation as the essential feature of folklore, characteristic of not just single phenomena, but folklore as a whole: "contemporary folklore is a variant of the old tradition which can be written down in terms of change" (ibid.: 76). Working from these premises, Hoppál comes to the conclusion that photocopied chain letters circulating in contemporary Hungary can be treated as a modern variant of prayers in the Middle Ages addressed to Saint Anthony of Padua, a miracle-working saint regarded as the master of alms of the Catholic church (ibid.: 73). In this way both prayers and chain letters are each but one link in a much longer chain of tradition.

This varying sameness of the past and present does not, however, hinder Hoppál

from regarding chain letters in their contemporary Hungarian context: “I will try to decipher the hidden message addressed to the unknown reader as well the message addressed to society which the phenomenon bears in its entirety” (Hoppál 1986: 63). Although Hoppál omits discussing his methodology, this aim of deciphering implicitly presupposes a structuralist framework. Messages hidden in chain letters are part of, and inseparable from, the larger sphere of cultural communication, from the Hungarian culture in its entirety. Hoppál first differentiates between constant and changing elements in chain-letter texts at his disposal, thereby arriving at their underlying binary oppositions, further reducible to the opposition of lack and its liquidation: “the letter was not in your hands – it has arrived; until now you missed out on luck – now you can wait for it!” (ibid.: 69; see also Dundes 1964: 61–64). Detecting in chain letters this basic building block of narrative structure, Hoppál points at intergeneric links between chain letters and various forms of prose narratives (ibid.: 68–69). Placing chain letters in a wider context of folkloristic means of expression enables him to once more refer to the chain of tradition, since the same opposition, the absence of something badly needed or wished for, was the incentive for prayers addressed to Saint Anthony of Padua.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – INCOMMENSURABILITY AS A RELATIONSHIP

In the concluding chapter of their collection of photocopied folklore, Dundes and Pagter make the following statement: “if the materials in this book prove nothing else, they prove that office personnel – educated, literate people – have folklore. The notion that literacy kills folklore must therefore be rejected” (Dundes, Pagter 1975: 221). Walter Anderson, analysing chain letters over three decades before Dundes and Pagter, could do without such statements. It would be misleading to regard Anderson’s interest in chain letters as typical of the historic-geographic paradigm or of all folklore studies of his time. However, his article proves that such written phenomena could be fitted within the historic-geographic method’s way of seeing folklore. As such, Anderson’s article enables us to point out the restricted nature of latter-day conceptions of previous research. Dundes and Pagter predict in the concluding part of their collection that “once the oral criterion falls, the whole question of literacy and its relationship to folklore has to be reconsidered” (Dundes, Pagter 1975: 221). While orality has no doubt been one of the focal points in defining both folk and lore, its meaning and application in actual research have nevertheless been ambiguous, more so than might appear from the perspective of a later and different paradigm. The hope expressed by Dundes and Pagter is significant if seen as mirroring their own ways of seeing folkloristics and their corresponding aspirations to reform it. In other words, it was Dundes and Pagter themselves who aimed at toppling the oral criterion, thereby turning the folkloristic treatment of written items into a theoretical problem and achievement in its own right.

Juxtaposing Anderson’s treatment of chain letters with that of Dundes and Pagter, one is confronted with the transforming agendas of folklore scholarship in the 20th century. From Anderson’s perspective, chain letters seemed to represent just another phenomenon of folklore, one that had its own typology and was to be subjugated to the principles of the historic-geographic method. Knowledge in folkloristic terms was about relationships between variants and about their origin, but also about organising

folklore phenomena into types. Similar lineages of descent of variants could be traced in various folklore genres. For Anderson, there existed an obvious link between chain letters and *Himmelsbriefe*, and it was possibly this very link that enabled him to study chain letters in the first place: it was owing to *Himmelsbriefe* that chain letters had a place in tradition, amongst phenomena regarded as folklore. Anderson's description of chain letters was based on that of *Himmelsbriefe*, though it seems that providing accurate genre definitions was not amongst his primary concerns. Instead, he focused on types and variants, looking for empirically-verified truth about the routes of chain letters in both time and space. Although Anderson's engagement with chain letters can be said to have implicitly broadened the scope of folklore studies that was not his goal *per se*.

Alan Dundes also argued for the exactness and objectivity of folklore studies, but had a different vision of folkloristics as a social science. For him, the key to the development of folkloristics into a real "science" – the basis for classification and organization – was in arriving at accurate genre definitions based on internal factors of folklore. Folklore could be thought of as a collection of folklore genres, each characterised and structured by a particular pattern. Items manifesting the same patterns were essentially the same, though there was a constant variation at the level of factors external to folklore materials. For Dundes, structuralism clearly represented a new method that would enable folklorists to secure the status of folklore studies, their precision, objectivity and efficiency. His engagement with chain letters in the mid-1960s can be seen as one in a long series of endeavours undertaken in order to engage in the new science of folklore. Similarly, his interest in xeroxlore could be described as an attempt to broaden stereotypical concepts about folk and lore: it was not so much about items of photocopied folklore itself as about the existence of such a phenomenon, of the possibility of written folklore copied by means of a machine and distributed amongst office workers. Working on the basis of these updated concepts of folk and lore, and by comparing patterns of folklore with those of the culture generally, folklorists seemed to be empowered to interpret culture and human existence in the broadest and most fundamental ways. Hoppál, for instance, took over several of Dundes' and Pagter's arguments, but, relating them to Hungarian discussions, nevertheless arrived at a perspective of his own. Unlike Dundes and Pagter, he lays emphasis on historical continuity, but treats it as a source for interpreting new phenomena and not for the continuity's own sake.

Treating the historic-geographic method and structuralism as different paradigms makes it possible to outline clear models of various research methods and even of periods in the history of a discipline, of its changing agendas. However, looking more closely at actual applications of these models, clear-cut borders dissolve. Both Anderson and Dundes saw folklore as consisting of various single items like chain letters that despite constant variation are capable of maintaining their integrity, which is also what makes them traditional. As such, they can be organised on the basis of a unified principle of some sort, classified into types or genres. While Kuhn regarded the incommensurability of paradigms as a fairly objective and unambiguous situation, there seems to be nothing objective about not being commensurable: apprehensions about previous methods, about the premises of past folklorists as well as about the history of folklore studies, are created from a certain point of view. They derive from the needs of the present moment, like the need to draw a visible line between the past and one's own research. Incommensurability could thus be seen not so much as a characteristic, but as a relationship,

a position taken in the present in relation to certain aspects of previous scholarship. It is a strategy of self-assertion, a positioning of oneself in relation to a past continuously open to new interpretations.

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