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## The Lullabye. On the Problem of Typology for Non-narrative Folksongs

Velle Espeland

Publishers of folklore, and folk poetry in particular, have had problems in finding a way to present lullabies to the public. The material looks confusing and it's difficult to establish typologies and classifications that do not fly in the face of certain aspects of the material. This is a problem that does not only concern lullabies but also non-narrative material as a whole. I will, however, concentrate on lullabies and related phenomena, and finally mention other types of material where this problem exist.

Central in the problem lies the term 'type'. This term has not been clearly defined, but despite the fact that it has suffered a great deal of scepticism lately, it still constitutes an important part of our folkloristic view of the world. Together with the term 'variant' it has been a key to the understanding of how folk poetry lives and how the oral tradition works.

The term 'type' is, as we all know, mostly used in folk-tales and ballad research. Even if many also in this case have perceived the somewhat vague term 'type' as a strait-jacket forced down on the material, the extensive use of type catalogues has made it difficult to get around this term if one wants to work with folk poetry on a wider scale. I have in mind catalogues such as Aarni Thompson: *The Types of the Folktale* and *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad*. The catalogues form a pattern for the way most publications are presented and for order and retrieval in folkloristic archives. The conception of type is founded on a view of folklore that is taken from, and is better placed in, botanics. Just like plants we may imagine that the variants group naturally in various types and classes. And the type system shall therefore appear as an underlying structure when analyzing the actual variants. This is of course not the fact. Even if the conception that a folk-tale or ballad has the 'correct' form is prevalent also among people where the tradition is kept alive, this popular conception of type will only be valid within a limited time and space. In a larger geographical area this 'type' will be less clear. In addition to this comes the most important argument against the use of types in folk poetry: There are no genetic limits for the human poetic fantasy in the same way as for plants. The environment around a bearer of tradition, that is the audience, will work to stabilize and suppress the innovative fantasy, but this is certainly also an effect having been exaggerated by the research. Just because so many folklorists looked upon the innovative fantasy as a falsification of the 'real' tradition, such poetry has only to a very small extent been documented.

The 'type' concept is firmly attached to the narrative aspect. Aarni Thompson's folk-tale catalogue and the Scandinavian catalogue of ballads are both made up of brief references to actions. I shall not dwell upon the problems surrounding the definition of narrative types, but only mention that there also within folk-tales and ballads is material where the epic thread is very thin or completely missing. This particularly applies to cumulative folk-tales and jocular ballads where the humour lies in a detailed description of an absurd situation or object. In such circumstances the 'type' concept is very difficult to use.

Before proceeding with the typological classification of lullabies I would like to present something that is typical of this genre. Firstly it is important to establish that this is not children folklore. It is not part of children's own culture. This may seem obvious, but lullabies have often been presented in connection with songs for children as part of children's culture.

Together with nursery rhymes and some activating play songs, this is a tradition for adults, used by parents, grandparents and educationists of small children in their play with children.

The Scandinavian word for lullabye is 'voggevisse' meaning cradle song. Lullabies have a clear function. The song has the purpose of making the child sleep. The lullabye is often performed together with a calming, rocking movement following the rhythm of the song. That does not mean that the song is attached to the cradle as such and thus almost extinct. On the contrary, this traditional type of song is very much alive, even today. To rock a baby in the arms while sitting or walking up and down the floor is probably the most usual technique. Also it proves that a usual pram is very suitable for rocking. This rocking movement does not need to be learned. Most young parents discover for themselves that the baby falls easier to sleep in a moving pram, and when it comes to learning how to get a baby to sleep, parents are quick to invent new methods.

In publications about folk poetry the lullabies are often presented as small, short verses. This gives a wrong impression of the song. Everybody who have tried to get small children to sleep by singing songs - and I guess most parents have tried that sometimes - know that it is a prerequisite that the song must be continuous, that it is perpetual. If the father or mother stops singing the child will lose its attention and become restless. As the child starts blinking its eyes the song is usually toned down; however, an experienced singer of lullabies would of course not dare to take the risk of stopping until the child is fast asleep.

The lullabye shall convey a presence of security and a quiet atmosphere to the child. To a small child this is not accomplished by the lyrics, but rather the voice of the mother and the rhythmic movement. As a matter of fact when the child begins to reach the age when the language becomes meaningful, it's only fortunate if the lullabye isn't interesting. The song should be monotonous. Many parents have told me that old hymns work well. This isn't just because the melody is often simple, but just as often because the contents of the lyrics are incomprehensible to young children.

The traditional material on lullabies in archives and publications is mostly documented by collectors hunting for poetry, characteristic texts and melodies. Nevertheless we see that this material is full of lull words, or nonsense words, that are believed belonging to lullabies. These words varies across Scandinavia, but they still have something in common, such as the syllables: by by, byss byss, lu lul, sullan lullan, tussan lullan, vi vi, or vy vy, vyss vyss, so ro. Since the text itself is not important, it's the rhythm that becomes the most important element in the lullabye. Each bar may be filled with different musical figures, there is even nothing against large tonal leaps, but the rhythm must be smooth. As the child is about to fall asleep and the singer is not sure whether the child is actually sleeping, the voice is lowered. At this time it's important not to disturb the child, at the same time the conception of secure presence is still to be marked. In this phase the song is often reduced to a whisper where the melody has gone and only the rhythm is left. The lyrics will also disappear and are replaced by lull words. My impression is that lull words with marked s-sounds are preferred, such as byss, vyss, etc. This rhythmic whisper can therefore replace the lullabye and shows us that rhythm is essential.

The song may be adapted to such conditions in different ways. The condition that the song must be continuous and perpetual can be met by singing the same stanza several times. But this will in the long run become unsatisfactory and boring to the singer. There are, however, other traditional ways to adapt the song to different conditions. When I some time ago gathered folk songs in the county of Rogaland, south west in Norway, I was impressed about the large repertoire of lullabies some of the singers possessed. Most impressive was the repertoire of lyrics, as most of the lullabies were variations over the same theme. This was often a simple melody that easily could be stretched out to such an endless song.

By repeated recordings it appeared that these lullabies were not established 'songs'. Text elements from one 'song' could often be used for the purpose of extending another. The thus flexible melody was therefore adapted to such an extension to an endless or perpetual song.

Without my material being sufficiently large to draw a firm conclusion it looks as if it is only lines having rhymes that are securely connected together. Thus these matched rhyming lines constitute the smallest elements in these perpetual lullabies. Besides this there are text material which belong together thematically, and this forms the basis for a conception of types existing in this environment. The singers were aware, however, that the lullabies did not differ clearly from each other in the same way as do narrative songs. In Norwegian material this technique with a flexible formula melody is mostly found in the southern and western part of the country. It is obvious that it is possible in such a simple formula melody to sing lyrics of very different kinds. In a material gathered by Liv Greni from Sætedalen valley I have also seen examples that text material from usual epic ballads were used for the formula melody. Folklore collectors' hunt for 'the real, old tradition' has resulted in this technique being little documented. It is, however, typical that many lullabye lyrics often are sung on the same melody. In Norwegian archive material it's often found: "To be sung like 'Ro ro til Fiskeskjær'" about lullabye lyrics. In Swedish and Swedish-Finnish material we find "Fiskeskärsmelodien". This could make one believe that we were talking about the same melody, but this is not so. At least not so in earlier times. Today the melody from the central-eastern part of this country has become the dominating one in that it has been introduced to us through song books and media.

The fact that extensive text material is used with the same melody makes it easier to sing it a long time, even if the melody is strophic and not as flexible as the formula melody in the southern and western part of the country.

In the gathered material there are also examples of lullabye melodies without lyrics. This has been believed to be recordings of melodies where the collector did not bother to document the text. It could, however, have been lullabye melodies without fixed lyrics. My grandmother used to sing lullabies in this way. Her lullabye melodies were either sung on lull words, or the lyrics were made up for the occasion. I use to sing it with lyrics only consisting of a simple repeated request about falling asleep.

It goes without saying that this is a kind of song very open to improvisation. As long as the rhythm is fixed and the voice conveys a secure presence, the meaning of the lyrics could be anything. I have even heard mothers singing lullabies while giving messages to others in the song. In the Scandinavian lullabye material we often find examples of lyrics that are not intended for the child but to other people. Here is an example ridiculing the mother:

Stakkars vesle båret som har så mange farar  
Prestar og studentar og andre lause karar  
(Poor little child of so many fathers  
priests and students and other stray wanderers.)

Some of such traditional lyrics also contain aggression toward the child:

Vil ikkje barnet sova  
så tek me det i leggen  
og slår det imot veggen  
og så skal barnet sova.  
If the child won't sleep  
grab it by the leg  
and bang it against the wall.  
Then the child will sleep.

This may be a useful self-therapy for a sleepless mother of a screaming child, and as long as the rhythm and melody is in order that should not make any difference to the child.

When the child gets older and acquire a language the lullabye changes its function. Then it is no longer necessary to sing the child completely into sleep. The song will rather be part of a repeating pattern of action at bedtime. This kind of song, which I choose to call a 'good night song' to distinguish it from the lullabye, may be replaced by reading aloud or telling a story. Now it is no longer the rhythm that's most important, but the lyrics. In the good-night song the lyrics will have to be on the child's terms. This does not imply a clear break with the lullabye the child used to hear before, but the endless lullabye is often broken up into smaller units that become meaningful to it. Improvisation can still be an element in the good-night song, but now the lyrics cannot be directed towards other nearby adults. Aggressive texts are also not possible. Most lullabies documented in folklore collections will no doubt be better suited as good-night songs. And the singers have probably produced this material whenever a folklorist arrived, firstly because the material is meaningful as such, and secondly because it gives a better meaning than the more flexible lullabye.

Lullabies and good-night songs are terms defining uses for songs, and even if there may be a gradual transition from lullabies to good-night songs the way they are used is very different and makes completely different demands on melody, rhythm and lyrics.

Regarding songs for young children we can also define some other applications. Firstly we have the play song. Here, I don't mean the children's own songs, but rather songs that are sung by adults during their play with children.

The adult clap the child's hands. Note that the melody is the Norwegian 'fiskeskjær'-melody. Other examples are songs for riding on the knee, rowing on the lap, etc. Some of these play songs represent a sliding transition to the children's own play songs, but the examples I mentioned belong to the adult tradition and are used together with children who are too young to sing by themselves. Other applications are activating or educational songs and ritualizing songs, where the purpose is to establish good habits by attaching the song to an action. Example: toothbrushing song. Of course there are also songs where the purpose simply is to entertain the child with good lyrics.

To return to classification of this type of song the problem is that the concepts we are using are about functions, while the concrete song material we want to classify are not unambiguously associated with definite functions. That no connection exists between repertoire and function is also apparent from today's situation. The lyrics and melodies documented by folklorists few generations ago are mostly gone today, but the applications and functions are still very much alive. Most parents of young children I have talked to have at least every now and then lulled their babies to sleep with lullabies. But the texts and melodies they use could be almost anything. This has to do with the intimate character of the lullabye. In the old society where people lived closer together the lullabye was more apparent and it was easier to learn melodies and lyrics from each other. In our time the lullabye is an almost unnoticeable song and the young mother is more dependent on melodies and lyrics from books and media.

At the same time she feels that this is a song that only concerns her and her child, and that she therefore is free to sing what she likes, also in the same way as earlier generations did.

Regarding play songs performed by adults, there is a firmer connection between function and text. And in this material it is in fact possible to pick lyrics specially adapted to the application. Still, it's worth noting that elements from play songs easily may be put into the endless lullabies.

Finally I want to mention that this problem concerns a large part of the non-narrative song traditions, particularly those where a concrete user function is what keeps the song tradition alive. Typical for this is the working song, that is songs to rhythmic work. The railway workers ('rallare') in Norway and Sweden used songs in order to keep time when they were drilling in rock. Nowadays we conceive these song as part of a fixed repertoire of epic ballads because the workers often made songs to particular railway installations. But in actual working situations they could sing anything as long as the rhythm fitted. A typical working song that have survived up to our time is the cable pulling song. The cable is forwarded by a gang who all must pull at the same time. A singer stands with a megaphone and sings a song where the rhythm marks the pulls. This is a kind of song where the rhythmic marking of the pulls is most important. The lyrics are of minor importance and usually freely improvised.

Another example is calls, for instance cattle calls. The purpose of this kind of song is to use tonal leaps that make the voice heard over long distances. There are also some traditional lyrics for cattle calls, and it is obvious that when one sings for a folklorist instead of a cow the lyrics will have a meaning it otherwise wouldn't have had. Akin to cattle calls is a kind of signal song (Norwegian: 'hjalning' or 'hauking') which functionally comes near the yodelling of Central Europe. The purpose is to make one's presence known over large distances in the mountains. Tonal leaps that can be heard far away is the important thing here. Lyrics are not necessary.

A review of the lullabye as a function tells us a great deal about the way to use a song, but a conclusion must also be that the lullabye is unsuitable to use as label on a number of songs. In a material of documented folk poetry it is possible to find something more or less adapted to this application, but this is really a jig-saw puzzle pieces detached from their context.