

COMMENTARY ON FOLKLORE

BRING ON THE TROLLS! OR  
WHERE DO YOU WANT THE LITTLE FAIRIES TO GO?<sup>1</sup>

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Not very long ago, I was traveling through Norway with an old friend with whom I had explored, as a fellow American and, I like to think, equally perceptive tourist and observer, a number of dark hinterlands and deep interiors. Both of us, as natives of the American South, still have a strong residuum of Calvinism to endure and, paradoxically, gain endurance from. But many of our friends, we boasted, would not have come up to the mark, coddled and cosseted as they were used to being by the Messrs. Hilton, Sheraton, et al.

But I digress from Norway, where we had arrived from Denmark -- flat, healthy, prosperous, and now apparently the world market for the pornographic. (Query: Would Southern Europeans have turned pornography into an industry like the Danes? Would they have felt it necessary? Was Protestantism reaping the whirlwind of centuries of fearing and despising the body?) Norway was in every way different, however -- fjords, mountains, glaciers, Grieg -- and pretty wild, though not too wild, I thought, or some good Norwegian Hausfrau would have stepped in and told nature to stay in its place. Their houses were well built and insulated and the rooms so swept and varnished that you could have eaten your breakfast off the kitchen floor with impunity. As my friend observed: "Well, at any rate, here you don't have to worry about drinking the water." But, as a great lover of the Italian, whether in spirit or in design, she found her senses continually assaulted by both the domestic architecture and the women's clothes, which did seem more like bags they just jumped into out of the bed every morning than they should. I suspected also that she was much less moved by the majesty and grandeur of the fjords and mountains than she was by the cypresses, the olive trees, and the sweet little rounded hills of Tuscany in the dusk. I reminded her that, in Italy, though, she didn't drink the water; and she conceded, with resignation that, no, you couldn't have it all.

So we went on our way from Oslo, a provincial city that suddenly got turned into a national capital nearly seventy years ago and seemed to an outsider to be still suffering an identity crisis, on a tour through the Norwegian interior which culminated, in every way, in Bergen -- a city of great individuality and charm and which one felt had somehow always belonged to itself and no one else.

Among other ventures there, we went out to visit Grieg's house, Trolldaugen. And it was there that my childhood, with its music lessons and the yellow Schirmer volumes and, on top of the piano, those ranks of miniature busts of the Great Composers (rewards for pieces memorized), came flooding back upon me as I stood there looking at Grieg's piano (had he played there that difficult sonata of his I struggled so much over?) and looked around the walls at the photographs and sketches of other Great Composers. (Near-

ly all of them, one had learned, had had to struggle desperately against poverty, even starvation and the anonymity of a pauper's grave, except Mendelssohn, who, one was told, was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, a disturbing picture to my youthful imagination, to say the least. Beethoven had caught a cold and died of pneumonia because his brother was too stingy to send him home in a carriage instead of a cart, and the Mozarts had had to dance to keep warm and no one knew where his grave was now.) But there I was in the presence of the Great Composers; and, for a moment, I had the same old thrill which has always seemed to me the greatest reward of travel: I'm there, all the way from home, actually seeing, hearing, breathing in the presence of what I used to read and dream about. And it's really itself, and I'm really myself, and there we are together, and who ever would have thought it might really come true?

But the Grieg expedition, which was essentially one of idyllic peace on a summer afternoon of great beauty and tranquillity, was soon afterwards countered or complemented by an organ recital I attended in one of the local churches in Bergen. Norway, as well as Germany, is good organ country; and I knew I could count on something good. But I hadn't bargained on a five-minute meditation about half-way through the program -- given by the pastor in both Norwegian and English. And it wasn't a sermon at all -- merely the reading of the eighth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which I thought I recalled was one of the things that got Luther going. And somehow it seemed highly appropriate for the occasion, both because of the setting in a Norwegian parish church and the audience being there addressed.

Attendees of organ recitals often seem to be loners: not only do they come alone, but they seem to prefer to listen alone, often hunched over and turned in on themselves, as though the titanic music had its work cut out for it to penetrate their isolation and try, if it could, to integrate them into some kind of reciprocal communion with both itself and each other. It's a different audience from what you'll get for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or The Messiah. And I don't know that I've ever seen anyone come away from an organ recital lifted up with a transcendent joy he wanted to share; I think he mainly wants to think about it privately, hold it close to himself as an individual happiness, not as part of a communal delight and wonder.

Well, that's all one side of Norway, but there's one more I'd like to take note of here. As a sometime teacher of the ballad and folktale, I have a great respect for the real popular lore of any people; and I regret and resent any attempt to vulgarize it or commercialize it. It's far too real, far too true for that sort of fakery-folkery traffic. And I think ultimately such treatment will bring its own revenge in the form of the loss of these cohesive symbolic forms for a particular society. They will of course be replaced by other symbols, whether of the dollar or the machine: people must have a folklore just as they must have some sort of God. One would like to think, however, that this lore was worthy of them and they were worthy of it. One way or another of course, they usually are worthy of each other, which equation seems inherent in the very nature of a folklore. One is perhaps better advised to hope that both a folk and their lore will reach upward rather than grope downward. Therefore, one is not very well comforted when he sees Japanese-made Indian headdresses, wax-works museums, panoramas from the life of Christ all displayed and, in one way or another, for sale on the slopes of the Great Smoky Mountains. (O, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Andrew Jackson, where are you now?)

And, alas, I found it the same in Norway. Trolls, those particularly unsavory Scandinavian monsters, were on display everywhere -- authentically hand-carved and hand-painted and authentically very expensive. But they were all so cute and cuddly looking that one felt they were only one jump ahead of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and that Walt Disney had surely been hiding behind the door the whole time. (Had Shakespeare himself lit this fuse when he turned respectable English fairies, traditionally formidable figures of the green earth green and earthy, into the picturesque wee folk of A Midsummer Night's Dream?) There was nothing of the really monstrous, really sinister about them, not even when, during an evening of fakelore all "laid on" by our friendly native guides in a slap-up new antiques villa one felt had been built just to debase the traditional in, one of the charming young ladies read, in charmingly broken English (one felt she might have just broken it in the next room, like a set of cheap crockery, for stage effect) what turned out to be one of the scariest of my childhood fairy tales: "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." But it was all so coyly rendered that all the hairiness and scarieness had gone out of it: it was charming, it was antique, it was "collected," it was dead. (I didn't think Grieg would have liked it at all: his own use of the lore of his folk had always seemed eminently respectful and decorous, I thought.) And my own thoughts on the matter were underscored when I beheld my Texas traveling companion, for whom all this organized Gemütlichkeit had been too overpowering (it degenerated finally into Musical Chairs), peering through a window from the outside, along with another tour member -- a Greek lady of strong Aegean features and forthright Hellenic spirit who wasn't having any of all this, either. And knowing nods and becks and wreathed smiles adorned their countenances as though to say, "I told you so." When one has had either the Alamo or the Peloponnesian War in his background, he certainly doesn't care much for domesticated, deodorized trolls.

I think it was from that point on that, as we progressed through the countryside, I began saying, by way of protest -- protest against many things, I should add -- inaudibly under my breath but sometimes almost out loud: "Bring on the trolls!" And the wilder the landscape, the louder I wanted to shout it. I didn't think the trolls themselves had taken much notice of all this: they probably were not nearly so much disturbed by their debasement as I was. They had been ignored, even commercialized before, I supposed; and they could afford to bide their time. Indeed, they might simply metamorphose themselves into whatever new terrors (in God's gracious plenty) the dollar, the machine, and Holiday Inns had to offer. But I didn't think they should ever be discounted or discredited, any more than scenery, genii loci, or any other wild particulars, any other parts of the world's boyd should be exploited or exported merely as commodities. I myself believed in the trolls and thought Norway might be turning them into teddy bears or mickey mice to its loss and at its peril.

And this conclusion leads me back finally, like so much else, to my childhood in West Tennessee, which, for me, is an ineradicable as the leopard's spots, certainly not a snake's skin to be sloughed off when springtime enlightenment comes in the form of either education or foreign travel. And I was thus reminded of a children's "pageant" of suitable inanity and embarrassment staged in my home town when I was growing up as part of a summer recreation program during the grand old Depression days of W.P.A. "projects". My own recollection is that I was an elf (my local dentist asserts that he was the "lead" elf) with a green costume, complete with

padded stomach (alas, needed no longer) and turned up toes. But it matters not: some of my best friends were butterflies, bees, even fairies. Anyhow, this appalling production, complete with song and dance, was presided over, produced and directed, by two very genteel ladies of advanced years and slender means who were as glad to get hold of the W.P.A. as it was to make them its own chosen vessels for the dispensation of its bounty and grace.

The pianist and choral and dance director was a nervous, flighty little woman surely made to order for such enterprises: it was all a perpetual crisis for her. Nothing would ever be "all right on the night" as far as she was concerned. But she was ballasted and complemented by her colleague, who was more or less the producer and director and everything else rolled into one. And not only was this latter lady not little and flighty and nervous: she weighed two hundred pounds, was stone deaf, and was imperturbability itself.

It was inevitable that these two good ladies should finally clash or at least dramatically differ, and this they appropriately did on the night of our one and only performance. Mrs. Clark, jumping back and forth across the keyboard and up and down on the piano stool, like popcorn exploding in a hot skillet, suddenly feared that all the performers were not in their places for the curtain rise and could be heard, from what passed for the orchestra pit in the auditorium of the elementary school (a piano hidden behind some painted orange crates), shrieking over the music of the overture she was frantically playing: "Mrs. Higby, Mrs. Higby, where do you want the little fairies to go, where do you want the little fairies to go?" Whereupon that good lady, in her deaf-as-a-post, foghorn voice, could be heard proclaiming grandly and serenely from behind the curtain: "I don't want them to go anywhere." Her reply may not have had the heroic finality of Horatius' stand at the bridge or Marshal Petain's "They shall not pass" at Verdun; but I still think after all these years, that it embodied a pretty good disposition to be made (or not made) of the fairy folk of West Tennessee. And now I think it's equally applicable to all the trolls in Norway.

#### NOTES

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A different version of this paper was read at the meeting of the Tennessee Folklore Society, Nov. 1971.