

Editor's Note: This essay was to be included in Roads into Folklore, Bibliographic and Special Series no. 14, but was misplaced at the time of publication. Richard Reuss' reference to the de Caro article in his "Introduction" denoted this essay. We extend our apologies to Frank de Caro.

## HOW I [WE ALL] BECAME FOLKLORIC: A THEORETICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Francis A. de Caro

It has long been my contention (like for two or three years now) that one of the most important things folklorists can study is themselves--why they became folklorists, why they study folklore, and why they think they study folklore. Such introspection, far from being narcissistic, should be self-revelatory (if not self-regulatory) and, among other benefits, ought to lay to rest the quaint and superstitious folk belief that we are in it primarily to dispel ignorance and advance the scientific study of culture (a prevalent view among many younger scholars in the field). For we shall unquestionably discover that there is a folkloristic mentality, a superorganic governing principle which we were virtually born into, and which predestined us like Calvinistic puppets on the road to heaven.

First some personal details; actually, I have often tried to recollect in tranquility my earliest interests (emotional or intellectual) in anything which might be denominated "folklore." I have unearthed the following, all of which fascinated me at the least enough not to have gotten buried very far down in my memory: a calypso song sung in a movie about diving for sunken treasure (one of my favorite film genres around age 7); square dancing and country music at the Big Apple roadhouse in Beech Lake, Pennsylvania, a place to which we went for a few weeks during the summers of ages 5 through 10; a recording of "The Auctioneer" that somehow managed to get played in a German ice cream parlor in Brooklyn, maybe around 1952 (I fulfilled a lifetime dream a few years ago when I finally got a recording with a version of it, in this case sung by the Charles River Valley Boys); the call of the tobacco auctioneer which always started off the Lucky Strike Hit Parade on t.v. (the best part of the show); a little later, the interest in magic and witchcraft; then in my freshman year of high school there was the variant of "Riddles Wisely Expounded" in the textbook which I read over and over again (in preference to "Invictus" and such like) at every opportunity--that was the same year I bought copies of Seligmann's History of Magic, Gardner's Witchcraft Today, and Michelet's Satanism and Witchcraft in the Marboro bookstore on 42nd Street one Saturday. The next year it was when the English teacher played a real live recording of "Lord Randall" (probably by Dyer-Bennett) in class (wow!). Of course, through all of this and most significantly, I had been an inveterate collector (toy soldiers, comics, flip cards, knives) with a pathological fear of ever throwing anything out.

This is to say that by my 14th year at the latest my destiny had been formed, and later life-factors, though they may have been more in the nature of immediate causes, were clearly quite secondary (a quasi-involvement in the folksong

revival of the late 50s-early 60s; in college I liked medieval literature; I was tired of social welfare work, thought literary grad study a dead end, was looking for something new). I am of course positing my own experience as a cultural universal. However diverse the backgrounds of folklorists may seem to be, a close examination ought to show that most of us share a mysterious cast of mind the possession of which becomes evident early in life. I do not mean that we all exhibited the same configuration. But beneath the level of our individual, diverse configurations there is a deep structure of common psychomotifs: a passion for the curious, the Gothic, the exotic (if you think the Lucky Strike tobacco auctioneer's cry isn't exotic to a kid from Brooklyn . . .), the mysterious--plus a mania for collecting, accruing, hoarding. (And, naturally, to avoid being buried one must impose order by, say, putting different things in different cigar boxes [this is the primitive origin of the rage to annotate]. This past summer while I was working over some curious tomes in the British Museum reading room trying to unlock the secret motives of some earlier English folklorists, while wandering around the galleries upstairs, my wife actually did discover the basic fact as to why Victorian anthropology/folkloristics developed the way it did [and this ties in with my theory]: They had this gigantic store of stuff which had been trucked in from far-flung outposts for obscure reasons and it had to be ordered and explained lest everyone go mad; fortunately most of the stuff looked pretty much alike and the survivalist-comparativist methodology emerged as not a bad expedience.)

Being neither a psychologist, a theosophist, nor an animist, I shall not speculate about how the folkloristic mentality comes to thrive in certain humans. However, now that we recognize its existence and nature, it becomes apparent that our fundamental views of the nature of folkloristics must be brought into line with this knowledge. Clearly the folklorist's personal interest in folklore is rooted in a personal/collective romantic esthetic, and though (s)he may indeed succeed to a measure of objectivity, the discipline can never become truly scientific. We are, nearly all of us, in it to gratify the longings of our youth, trying to relive in an approved adult manner earlier fantasies, be they of calypso-singing deep sea divers or of ghostly Gothic transformations (which were in turn merely manifestations of our unity of mind). We seek the extraordinary and cannot be satisfied by the careful patterns of the usual. We want the mysteries and no one wanting the mysteries wants the mysteries rationally dissected. No amount of structuralism, of resorting to linguistics, of model constructing (however pleasant such activities may be) can transcend the basic premises of our soul. I was simply destined to become a folklorist (via some quirk of genes, blood, and astrological movements?), as were we all.

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