

Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Portrait of German Culture through Folklore. By Alan Dundes. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. xi + 174. Cloth \$17.50.

Reviewed by Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl

The title of this book is intriguing, as are the illustrations and photographs one would encounter on leafing through the volume while idling away chance hours in a bookstore. In fact the subject matter is (literally) shit, which would suggest that it has much to recommend it to those strange characters who frequent the "Furor, Vice, and Folly" section at remaindering houses. Their suspicions might be aroused, however, by the impressive eighteen page bibliography and the fact that the book is published by a reputable university press and written by an internationally-known scholar. Nothing is sacred it seems when even shit can get taken seriously. What then becomes of those of us who are expected to take the subject, the book and the author seriously? The notion that a preoccupation with excrement and other paraphernalia of anality is an important facet of German national character is hard to swallow--at least without something to sugar and spice the pungency of such a thesis. My one objection to the book is that while there is plenty of spice, there isn't much sugar--but more on that later.

As the author makes clear in the "Preface," the book was to some extent banned before it was born. The thesis was presented initially as Dundes' presidential address to the members of the American Folklore Society in October 1980. Even then people were quick to voice their outrage at the "portrait" that Dundes proposed. Nevertheless, the editors at the **Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology** and later at the Columbia University Press found the manuscript worthy of academic support. I agree with the cues provided by these editors: there is much of value in the book to counter its undeniable potential to offend even the most charitable of readers. And let me say right away that the offense one might feel on reading the book is not necessarily tied to personal sensibilities about smutty language or overt discussion of anal eroticism. Rather it is the thesis itself, the author's methodology, and his specula-

tions on the implications of the thesis that are worrisome to folklorists and other academics reading the book. The book is problematic in that respect precisely because the author has chosen to explore an inherently offense concept (national character) and to use a qualitative rather than a quantitative methodology. In contrast, for example, Lynn's well-known study **Personality and National Character** (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1971) compares a dozen different national groups statistically along selected thematic axes (food consumption, tobacco use, alcoholism, etc.) to discover quantitative patterns or configurations that suggest relatively safe national profiles. I say "safe" because the statistics really **are** unambiguous--a quality Dundes tries to claim for the folklore material he surveys. Folklore materials would be a safe bet if they **were** unambiguous, but, frustrating as it may be, they are quite ambiguous--something for which Dundes should be grateful after all, since it is the ambiguity of artistic expression (folklore) that enables his readers to accept even so outrageous a thesis as his suggestion that German preoccupation with anality is a primary national characteristic.

Let me name then some of the virtues of the book--virtues I see tied to the author's courage in following his own lights in pursuing the topic rather than resorting to "safer" methodologies or a nation less prominent and problematic than Nazi-tinged Germany. His thesis is that "German folklore (and for that matter German literature and culture generally) demonstrates a propensity for anal eroticism" (p. 142). He supports this thesis with numerous examples of folklore, popular culture, and materials associated with academic or elite culture. Dundes is successful in demonstrating a characteristic German preoccupation with defecation, dirt, and its eradication, and the backside of the anatomy. Furthermore he has shown how folklore can profitably be considered along with other kinds of material in the study of national character. Researchers in various Western area studies have long needed incentive to include as primary sources materials from the field of folkloristics in addition to those from history, literary studies, sociology, or political science (something Africanists, for example, have done for some time). One accomplishment Dundes can claim is a formidable push for the general acceptance of folklore materials among the sources scholars

should feel encouraged, even obliged, to use in their investigations into national identity.

Another value of the book--and one that will make the work essential reading for students of national character--is the author's articulation of important issues and problems in national character research, especially from a folkloristic viewpoint. Among the issues of particular interest to folklorists would be: (1) the potential usefulness of von Sydow's concept of the *oikotype* in the comparison of regionally variably cultural materials; (2) the question of the stability of national characteristics over time; (3) the interrelationships among stereotypes, national characteristics, and ethnic slurs; (4) the prominent role of folk metaphors in identifying national character (in contrast to the more elaborate conceits of elite artistic expression); and of course (5) his basic assertion that the folklore of a group reflects the character of the group. Certain other points of methodology the author raises with some ambivalence, more by way of prolepsis. For example, he admits that "it is not enough to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Germans have a preoccupation with feces. I should also have to demonstrate that other people do not share a similar concern" (pp. 142-43). He then excuses himself from that impossible task. A "portrait" such as that in *Chicken Coop* is not a chart built upon statistical data; whatever inspired his choice of the term "portrait" for the essay was a more suitable Muse than that which voiced the nagging concern with scientific operationism. A portrait is inescapably subjective, even when empiricism is invoked as part of the rhetoric. The choice of Hitler's story of the lost school examination certificate as an illustration (an individual example) was much more effective (for me) than any detailed list of comparative absences of the scatological trait in other lands would have been. Nevertheless, as Dundes obviously realized, it was the seeming arbitrariness of his methodology that would bother some of his readers.

It is not the methodology of the book that bothers me. Basically *Chicken Coop* involves much the same methodological assumption as do many of the chapters in Dundes' earlier book *Interpreting Folklore*. As in many of those essays, he assumes the role of a psychoanalytic therapist and suggests an interpretation of the given situation that

may or may not be accepted by the reader. If the interpretation "works" for a given reader, then that reader feels satisfied that his or her understanding has been increased; if not, then the "right" interpretation is yet to be offered. As Heinz Kohut suggests (**How Does Analysis Cure?**, University of Chicago Press, 1984), one should worry less over interpretations that fail to simultaneously fit Freud's model and cure the patient and rejoice instead over those that "work" even if they are flukes. This is not the same as admitting to sheer arbitrariness; rather Dundes, like the therapist, recognizes that some vignettes, illustrations, examples, will resonate for some readers while others will be ineffective--thus the abundance of examples. That seems an arguable methodology. What I did find objectionable in the book was its uncharitable tone (no sugar). He claims near the end of the book that "the anal personality traits inherent in German national character are neither good nor evil per se" (p. 150). And yet he draws for the reader a chain of cultural determinism that ties this anal "impulse" to Auschwitz--an undeniable evil. I think the chain is a false one; German anal characteristics were no doubt useful to the Nazis, I would agree, but the impulse toward anality did not "result in...an Auschwitz" (p. 151). It is not surprising that the author finds it hard to be light-hearted about German anal eroticism. The aim of any national character study should be to enhance our appreciation for a unique cultural personality. Dundes does this up to a point; then his Freudian bias tempts the reader into an implied judgment rather than an amused and friendly acceptance. For the sake of his German great grandfather (to whom he dedicates the work) and Germanic folks everywhere, the book needs clearer evidence that the author finds something likable about the personality he describes so well. Nevertheless, the cause of national character studies is well-served by **Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder**. On reading it, I at least, am convinced that most Germanic people consider their tendency toward anal eroticism an endearing trait, not a psychosis--Freud and Dundes notwithstanding.