FOLKLORE: A VEHICLE FOR TEACHING OBJECTIVE ANALYSIS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

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Ideally, the university learning experience should develop our intellectual faculties at the same time that it makes us aware of the world about us and our relationship to it. Unfortunately, much university instruction accomplishes neither. The prospects that even a willing and intelligent student will experience intellectual delights and world awareness in the context of today's academic community are dim. However, because of its popularity and its very nature, the growing discipline of folklore can be said to offer the student a better chance of developing these vital human capacities than many other current fields. The materials of folklore are living, changing entities, and the analysis of this lore requires a high degree of objective intellectual discipline; consequently, the study of folklore, especially the collecting project, can be an exciting excursion into the human potentials of intellectual and cultural awareness.

Unless a person knows the beauty of abstract synthesis and analysis, and unless he can also feel and see himself as part of a present world, he is only partly alive. Granted, some people choose an academic career in order to escape the world of the present and immerse themselves in the world of the mind; for these people there are plenty of "library" studies to be done which can be a credit to the discipline of folklore. We all know our desires and limitations, and those who wish to be book scholars are clearly capable of doing valuable work. But folklore also offers the student who wishes to be an active part of his environment a chance to be so--with the important qualification that before he becomes "active," he must learn intellectual discipline and objectivity.

While it is not necessary for the actor to know the scholarship of the plays of Shakespeare, it is important for the director to know it, and while it is not always important for the creative writer to know the criticism and scholarship on the writers who have come before, it is helpful for the teacher of writing to know it. So, if the folklore scholar-collector wishes to work efficiently, he, too, must know what has been done by the library scholars in his field. Certainly the desk scholar can benefit by some knowledge of what it is like on the battle line; indeed, he may have all too clear an idea of what collecting is like and consequently has chosen his desk. Thus, if the student of folklore is to emerge from his training a whole person, he should have some first hand knowledge of the abstract study as well as the living condition of folklore.

The desk scholars who study folklore generally fall into two major groups: those who have done historic-geographic studies for the pleasure of discovering patterns in the material, and those who have applied literary criteria of the (then) current esthetic to oral literature. The historic-geographic scholars have often attempted to place the texts they study in an historic and cultural continuum. However, their work has been primarily of value as an intellectual exercise in and of itself--and such

efforts can be worthy. Ironically, historic-geographic scholars have been at the mercy of past folklore collectors, many of whom have had a desk scholar's outlook in that they were interested in the item qua snapshot rather than the continuing life of the material.

The second major group of desk scholars is comprised of those interested in the intellectual-esthetic exercise of applying the values of literary criticism to oral literature. Most of these scholars have approached the lore in terms of esthetic values currently in vogue with the academic-artistic community. This type of analysis has been applied to those items of folk performances which generally match those of the literary world (poetry, drama, short story, and so forth). When a particular version of "Sir Patrick Spens" is analyzed its distinct literary qualities can be appreciated. However such an exercise does not mean that those same qualities will be in other versions of the ballad or that all ballads satisfy the same critical criteria. Moreover, it says nothing about why the people who sang the song actually perpetuated it. Some persons carry on songs for reasons of sentiment ("my mother sang it") rather than for esthetic reasons. So literary analysis, a delightful exercise in appreciation of those items which can withstand its ethnocentric rigors, most often says little about the folk esthetic and often totally ignores the concept of comparative esthetics. Thus, the desk literary analysis of the past has usually been an ethnocentric exercise, but one which yields its own introspective pleasures. If, for example, we happen to find a folk drama which fulfills Aristotle's rules, all well and good. If not, it does not mean that the folk drama is less of a play; we simply must investigate the folk esthetic more.

The desk study of folklore yields its own pleasures and ironies. For example, one cannot help but be struck by the appropriateness of the "wild roses" in the Victorian southern mountain version of "The Unfortunate Rake;" the roses are no longer "white" for purity, nor are they used to disguise such an unVictorian concept as the smell of the corpse.[1] Similarly, one cannot help but be struck by the accidental humor history foisted on the meager version of Child 170, "The Death of Queen Jane," as found in Kentucky where "neighbor" Jane, for totally unknown reasons, seems to be having some hallucination about "The Red Rose of England," which echoes idiotically out of context from the past in the ears of the desk scholar.[2]

One must be careful to claim neither too much nor too little for the desk scholarship of either the historic-geographic academician or the literary analyst. For to deny the value of human abstract intellectual experience is foolish. If one graduates from college without knowing that he can sit in solitude, study material intensely, and come to conclusions which are the result of his own particular insights, he has not seen a part of the beauty of which his very human mind is capable. To be a complete human being, he must know this part of himself.

But to draw students into the study of folklore because of its innate "beauty" without teaching comparative esthetics, or to lure students into comparative studies to find archetypes without mentioning function and context is to paint only half the picture of the field of folklore. The student must be allowed to choose. While desk scholarship can be a beautiful experience for its own sake, it must be chosen just for that reason and for no others. For the study of folk materials out of context

is no more than a potentially beautiful exercise which develops a very important part of our being.

Students today come to folklore classes with a variety of pre-concieved ideas about what it is they will learn. Some feel they will discover Truth in the utterances of simple people; some feel they will learn to sing and/or dance. I have discovered in my classes that almost all students come to folklore because they feel the materials they will study will apply to them in some way in the world today. However, the humanizing and expanding aspects of folklore in the Here and Now usually are not a part of the ideas most students hold about folklore. Preconcieved notions often have to be recast into different, more solidly exciting ideas of what folklore really is. The relevance in the study of folklore comes from studying the material as living and functional; it comes from learning how to analyze with focus, observe objectively yet with feeling, relate to other human beings with humility, and know when to ask "why."

To a great extent the future of folklore studies lies in our asking the following questions: what material has been perpetuated, where it has been perpetuated, by whom it is perpetuated, how it has been changed, and why it has been perpetuated and changed. In asking these questions of current material, one cannot help but find insights and answers to current social phenomena. Thus, by studying folklore as it exists today one cannot avoid being in and of the world. In his study of even seemingly trivial material, the folklorist can find truths which contain social dynamite. What better way is there to study prejudice than to look at jokes? What better way is there to study group values than to study the tales about its heroes? The folklorist is uniquely trained to study such materials; he must, however, ask questions that are different from those of the desk scholar. It is often the apparently trivial nature of the materials he collects which allows the folklorist to discover much unguarded yet important cultural and social data frequently unobtainable through more direct questioning.

Studying folklore in living context enables us to describe social phenomena (and esthetics are one such phenomenon), as well as offer avenues for possible solutions to social "ills." This latter idea, the idea of what might be called "Applied Folklore," is one which I will not explore extensively here; we are all aware of how folklore has been used for political purposes in the past, and we all hope that our own particular personal idea of application is justified (for example, to improve health facilities, to make people more understanding of what is beautiful to groups other than their own). I am not suggesting that folklorists should go out and implement their suggestions; implementation should be left to other experts. I am saying, however, that the study of traditional materials can be relevant to students today by enabling them to ask about, and find possible reasons for, what is happening in the world of the present.

The teacher of folklore has to teach his students objectivity before he can teach anything approaching "applied" folklore. I find the term collecting project blends the agonies and the ecstacies of both the intellectual abstract investigation and the study of what is relevant to the student in the present world. The collecting project, as I assign it, is analogous to the classical academic research paper. The only difference between the collection paper and such term papers is that the student includes his collection as an appendix to his analysis of the materials. The

material in the collection, then, can be considered similar to the books on Shakespeare read in the library along with the notes taken on the books by the student. The collection can footnoted just as any library source. Thus, the data upon which the student bases his conclusions is contained partly in the Appendix, and partly in his library sources indicated in his bibliography.

It is extremely helpful to insist upon an analysis in all student collections. A required analysis makes the student focus his thoughts before going into the field, and prevents him from collecting folklore qua folklore--seeking unrelated "quaint" items. The student first has to conceptualize his topic, focus and limit it in terms of the group(s) from which he will collect, the genre(s) he will collect, and what it is he wishes to ask about the material he is collecting. To help with this first step he must do library research, so he will know what has already been done (or not done). He can then build upon existing research or test it. The collecting process makes the student interact with people and with living lore, and shows him how he influences the transmission process as he collects. The analysis of the collection requires the student make the Herculean effort of not just objectively viewing the past studies (books are always easy to be objective about) but of objectively viewing himself as part of the collecting scene, while examining what he has collected. He must be able to accurately describe not only the lore, but also the environment in which it was collected (including himself as a factor). Once he has returned to the library after collecting, and once he has accurately reported what it is he has collected, then the student studies his own collection as a document, and applies his powers of fair and objective reasoning to the collection in order to reach a conclusion. Such a conclusion will be the result of synthesizing his own data with reasearch that has been done before, and his conclusions will appear as ten to fifteen pages of analysis accompanying his collection.

It all sounds quite dull and stodgy on paper, but in action the collection project is one which is extremely rewarding and exciting to the student. If done well, it teaches the student more about both library research and about people (including himself); it teaches the student to objectively report and analyze; and of no little importance, it shows him that he can function in society as a scholar who relates to issues which are pressing (such as stereotypes) or simply enjoyable (what is beautiful in a song to a particular group). The folklore collection project can thus serve as a vehicle by which the student can develop both his capacity for objective analysis and cultural awareness.

NOTES

1. "One Morning in May," from the album The Unfortunate Rake (Folkways, FS 3805, Side I, Band 6). Text appears in the accompanying booklet on page 6.

2. MacEdward Leach. The Ballad Book. New York, 1955. pp. 479-480.