

BOOK REVIEWS

THE STUDY OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE IN THE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE:
REACTIONS OF A NEOPHYTE FOLKLORE TEACHER

A Review Article

In The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (W. W. Norton, 1968), Jan Brunvand writes that "there are three necessary stages involved in the study of all folklore: these are collection, classification and analysis." (p. 11) Brunvand's book is largely concerned with the second stage, classification, and therefore with definition and example. His definition of folklore as "those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary example" (p. 5) is broad enough to encompass the oral genres as well as aspects of material culture. Working within the framework of this general definition, Brunvand begins his classification of Anglo-American folklore.

Folklore is divided first into the realms of verbal, partly verbal and non-verbal material. While such terms serve to indicate rough divisions of folklore, they lead to a certain fragmentation in the discussion of genres. For example, Brunvand's treatment of ballads and folksongs (i.e., verbal folklore) is separated from his discussion of folk music (i.e., non-verbal folklore). Such questions as the nature of tune-text relationships must therefore be left unexplored, and the reader questions whether the convenience of the verbal/non-verbal classification compensates for the loss of such discussion. The verbal, partly verbal and non-verbal distinction is only the first of many divisions set up by Brunvand. He discusses "four basic theories" which explain the folk and their lore, and suggests "four major kinds of American folk groups." (p. 21) "Three qualities" distinguish the "four major categories of proverbs with several subdivisions." (p. 38) The "true riddle" may "have fully six distinct parts" (p. 50), which Brunvand illustrates. He mentions "three bodies of world myth" (p. 80), and establishes "four groups of legends...on the basis of their primary concern with religion, the supernatural, individual persons, or localities and their histories." (p. 87)

Such divisions are further dissected in many of Brunvand's chapters. Under the category "jump-rope rhymes" we find mentioned the plain jump and the endurance jump, the latter frequently distinguished by prophetic rhymes. Speed jump games and action rhymes are also isolated. (p. 65) Since these minute distinctions would rarely be required of doctoral candidates in folklore (excepting, of course, a student whose dissertation dealt with jump-rope rhymes), their value to the undergraduate student is limited. These breakdowns of subject matter were favorably received by students who had used The Study of American Folklore primarily as a source for background and reference material. "In comparison to texts used for other courses, Brunvand's book scores high due to his emphasis upon outline of material and definition of terms," wrote one student. Another revealingly indicated that "This definition, along with many examples presented throughout the book, gives the student a sense of security..."

In this latter statement is found the greatest drawback to such classi-

fications as those mentioned above. While Brunvand's minute divisions and subdivisions serve to isolate in a manageable way distinctive features of the genres, such phrases as "four major kinds" and "three characteristics" can also serve to arouse in students a response akin to that which the bell triggered in Pavlov's dogs---magic markers immediately begin to underline the mentioned categories on the assumption that to memorize the "numbered" items will guarantee success on the final examination. To point out such a drawback is not, of course, to criticize Brunvand--- it is rather an unfortunate comment on the study habits encouraged by many undergraduate courses---but to suggest the purposes for which his book can and cannot be successfully used.

Brunvand states in his "Acknowledgements" that certain folklorists "will recognize many of their ideas in this book," and we find in his chapters reliable summaries of certain folklore theories. His presentation of theories of myth origins, for example, is a model of conciseness. (pp. 83-86) Still, in a work primarily concerned with classification and division, theoretical considerations can be given no more than summary treatment. The emphasis on classification and definition also leaves little room for functional analysis. While Brunvand is clearly aware that "the study of folklore is a subdivision of the broader study of man and his works..." (p. 9), the focus of his book allows only brief mention of the ways in which folklore may be related to other aspects of culture.¹

The use made of The Study of American Folklore, therefore, will depend upon the individual instructor's conception of the purpose of the undergraduate folklore course. Those who feel that the aim of such a course is to produce students who can define and classify the materials of folklore can rely solely upon Brunvand's book. To be truly meaningful, though, a course should go beyond mere definition. While professors of education have bandied such terms as "creative learning" to the point of meaninglessness, it remains true that inductive and problem solving experiences are vital parts of the learning process. The discipline of folklore happily allows us to provide such experiences in helping the student discover the roles played by the folklorist in his own natural milieu.

Amplification of the suggestions made by Robert J. Adams ("A Functional Approach to Introductory Folklore," FOLKLORE FORUM, I [1968], 10-12) is perhaps unnecessary, but an exercise in my own introductory course will illustrate the above point. Within the first two weeks of the semester, students were asked to collect five to seven obscene or ethnic jokes. Standards for collection, such as reporting the exact words of informants and noting the context of each item, were explained before the assignment was begun, and pertinent articles were assigned.

In the two hours devoted to discussion of the completed collections, many issues of central concern to the folklorist emerged. One student, who had collected (unobserved) his jokes in a small town bar and then attempted to question the narrators, all in various stages of intoxica-

¹ The excellent suggestions for future study which appear in Brunvand's chapters suggest both theoretical and analytical explorations.

tion, about "why the jokes were funny" had a great deal to tell the class about problems of gaining rapport. The subject matter in collected jokes, ranging from an eight year old's "A pig fell in the mud" to items best left to the obscenity issues of folklore publications, revealed how much of obscenity (i.e., what's "dirty"?) depends upon the cultural experience of the informant and the context of narration. Comparisons of various collections in small group discussion revealed that variants of seven jokes (in a class of thirty-five) had been gathered, and the nature of variation, which in several cases involved the protagonists' switching from Rastus and Liza to Poles or Kentuckians, led into a discussion of the functions of humor in our society.

Likewise, the discussion which followed a short legend collecting project ended with a student classification for folk legends. The categories students suggested turned out to be the same as Brunvand's "four groups," but because the classification had been evolved through analysis of the students' own data, and not simply presented as a "fact," it became a significant and functioning part of the semester's work.

Such assignments allow the student to observe and to involve himself in the materials and processes defined by Brunvand.² This is not to suggest, however, that we simply turn our students loose with their notebooks and use whatever materials they can glean as the substance of our courses. A combination of collecting, discussion, and reliable reading materials is essential to the success of any folklore course.

Brunvand's book is therefore necessary as a source for background and reference materials. His clear and authoritative treatment of materials which formerly required a great deal of lecture time for their presentation allows us to devote class sessions to discussions of theory, function and process. While such discussions obviously lie at the heart of any folklore course, they can be structured only upon a foundation of precise definition. The Study of American Folklore provides that foundation.

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² The comments made by several members of the American Folklore Society last november (viz., that undergraduate students should not be assigned collecting projects because they could not produce worthwhile collections) seem to ignore the function of the student collection. We should be more concerned with the processes in which our students become involved than with the products which they produce, although with proper guidance the product---the collection---becomes a valuable contribution to our field.