

"DISTORTED FUNCTION"
IN MATERIAL ASPECTS OF CULTURE¹

W. F. H. Nicolaisen

The claim of the New York Times that it contains "All the News That's Fit to Print" may sound to some like an exaggerated boast difficult to sustain in the contexts of its pages. Be that as it may, the following short item printed in the edition of Thursday, 18 July 1974, can hardly have been included because of its news-worthiness although it provides a fitting introduction to the topic I wish to discuss; under the heading "Rain Gutters for Planters" it reads:

LONG BEACH, Calif. - White aluminum industrial rain gutters make good planters for terraces, porches or even indoors. Charles O. Hardy, writing in Modern Maturity, says the five-inch wide five-inch deep material can be bought in varying lengths and used to hold small potted plants at whatever height is convenient for the gardener.

This brief note serves as a suitable initial illustration of our subject matter: the secondary use of a folk-cultural item for purposes other than the one for which it was primarily designed and manufactured, and the motivation behind such use. In calling this shift in usage, that is to say, rain gutter used as planter, distorted function, I am borrowing a term sometimes employed in the linguistics analysis of literature, especially of poetry, when evaluating, for instance, the degree of audacity displayed in the reshaping of "normal" language for poetic purposes, a process which may affect

not only phonological but also morphological, lexical, semantic, and syntactic linguistic structuring, the yardstick being some abstract, and perhaps wholly imaginary, notion of "ordinary" prose usage.²

"Distortion" in such an analysis, as in this discussion, has no negative connotations but simply means a deliberate and strategic shift away from "ordinary" usage, more often than not to convey special meaning, although sometimes simply to delight for its own sake. "Function," on the other hand, may be understood as the purposeful, appropriate, and effective use of an item in proper fulfillment of practical needs.

While, of necessity, our illustrations are going to be more or less contemporary, there is no doubt that people have reused durable parts of otherwise broken-down equipment for many centuries as part of a campaign of thriftiness imposed by circumstances as well as by outlook. Often this behavior meant repeated usage for the same primary purpose but not infrequently a new, secondary use was found for the item of material in question. Although such new usage might well be closely related to the original one, there appears to be no limit to the imagination in this respect, as I discovered for myself in 1958 in the Hebridean island of North Uist, where I noticed not only old harrows, both wooden and metal, clamped into the roofs of houses to hold the thatch down but also an upturned leaking boat converted into a hen-house. Both these functional conversions were obviously makeshift and not particularly pleasing to the eye, but they served their purposes admirably. They might therefore well be termed predominantly "practical" distortions, since, at least in the eye of the investigator, they appear to be almost totally non-decorative, indeed not at all pleasant from an aesthetic

point of view. Such chiefly "practical" re-use is obviously almost always dictated by economic considerations, as well as by the problem of disposal.

Perhaps the most numerous group of items falls within the category which might be labeled "practical and decorative."³ Typical of this class would be the widespread use of empty wine-bottles, especially of the Mediterranean variety, as lampstands. However, just as representative are, at least in the eastern United States, the frequently seen milk-cans which, since they are no longer needed to contain and transport milk, were found to be excellent portable letterbox supports, once it had become necessary to provide these items at the roadside at a convenient height for motorized mailmen. In the first instance, milk-cans are likely to have been left over from the days of milk-producing farm life with its own traditional ways of milk collection, and therefore appear in what one may consider to be their natural setting. There are thousands of such milk-cans catching the traveler's eye on the rural routes of upstate New York, for example, and there is certainly nothing dramatic about their secondary function, which seems to be verging on the purely practical, though undoubtedly the shape of a milk-can was also found to be aesthetically pleasing by those who put it to new, public use, as is easily demonstrated by the contrasting use of old oil drums, paint cans, and similar containers for the same purpose. When the same milk-can, usually repainted, appears as a letterbox support in the streets of suburbia, however, obviously bought for the purpose from a local dairy, the perspective changes, in so far as it is clearly the aesthetic element, coupled with a sense of quaint pseudorusticity, which dominates over the also present practical aspect. After all, it is possible to purchase

items designed primarily as, and intended to be, mailboxes at no great expense. Many people, of course, stress this decorative function even further by adding flowers to the arrangement, just as flowers alone, the shaping of a mailbox as a miniature house, or the addition of, let us say, a ploughshare, provide decorative features not at all necessary for the practical purposes of mail collection and delivery. With regard to milkcans, the next step, the commercialized exploitation of the phenomenon of distorted function, is the plastic milkcan purchaseable in department stores and shopping malls, and quite clearly never intended as a container of milk, but only shaped like one--having its functional distortion built in from the start, so to speak, or imposing its shape without any compelling practical reason on what is, under these new circumstances, its primary function, that is to say, the support of an outside letterbox and its adjustment to the appropriate height.

As such plastic milk-cans, even when filled with sand or stones, are however, normally too light to serve as mailbox supports, especially in rough weather, they are more likely to be used to hold flowers. As in our initial newspaper item, many kinds of vessels capable of containing flowers tend to be converted easily to such a decorative function. I have seen a large variety of such containers, from disused cauldrons, redundant metal troughs, discarded wheelbarrows, and leaking barrels, to eccentric toilet pedestals. The latest addition to this collection of neorustic showpieces to be displayed on one's front lawn seems to be the wishing-well complete with bucket and handle, never designed to hold water, truly bottomless, presumably a metaphor for the unconfessed desires of its proprietors, as well as an opportunity for some floral decoration.⁴

Milk-cans, cauldrons, wheelbarrows, and wells are thus not only containers--they are symbols of an ever diminishing and more distant rural, non-industrial past that has become almost a "Golden Age" long gone in the eyes of city dwellers and suburbanites. It is not surprising therefore that motels, restaurants, and stores try to lure this vacationing species of humankind onto their premises by exhibiting similar symbols near their entrances, or at least on their grounds, like the plough outside a motel, a patriotically decorated buggy in front a similar establishment, a farmer's cart incongruously serving to indicate a "wholesome" gas station, or a brightly painted wagon more appropriately advertising a store selling antiques. Sometimes such vehicles seem to have been deliberately put outside undistinguished modern houses in order to generate an artificial flavor of an age now gone. In all instances, these suggestive icons of a pre-car era are also clearly meant to have pleasant aesthetic appeal.

Stronger in its function as a reminder of a squandered, unrecoverable past than all the material items listed so far and unending in its invocation of non-urban folkiness and so-called peasant simplicity, is the wheel. Indeed, it is probably not too extravagant to claim that the wheel has become the suburban symbol of American rusticity, decorative in its smooth roundness and symmetrical radiation of its spokes, usually painted in the innocent white of an untainted past. Sometimes wheels are simply left standing in contrived abandon, either leaning against a building (significantly often a garage!) or against a pile of stones, but mostly they have been placed more deliberately at the end of a driveway or entrance, sometimes singly,

but more often in pairs giving visual emphasis to an additional lateral symmetry, or rarely in even larger numbers employed as boundary markers or delimiting property. Sometimes their dominating decorativeness is also exploited functionally beyond the mere marking of driveways and property lines, in so far as they may serve as nameplates, advertisements for antique stores, and as ornamental additions to, or supporting props of, mailboxes.

Although the wooden cartwheel predominates, iron wheels not infrequently serve the same purpose. Sometimes, millstones take their place, providing not only acceptable stone-made alternatives considered pleasing to the eye, but through their connection with the other aspects of milling, their own special category of pre-industrial symbolism. As abbreviating, perhaps even oversimplifying signs, they interpret, or reinterpret for the displayer and the onlooker the perceived nature of an age.

Anybody wishing to own decorative wheels no longer has to go out into the country looking for elusive broken-down carts or dilapidated sheds. Stores in summer tourist centers will save them the trouble, although not the expense. Often such stores display wheels side by side with yokes, or pair outdoor cart wheels with their indoor equivalent of the age of homespun, spinning wheels, which themselves, apart from featuring as purely decorative, unworkable pieces of "furniture" in many private homes, have become recognized symbols of the less robust aspects of a more leisurely age gone by, at least in the opinion of those who buy and display them, regardless of cultural levels.

Practical items in the farmer's year, wheels, milk-cans, cauldrons, or ploughshares (and their imitations), have become decorative pieces expressing the fascination and preoccupation with

a more direct link with the life-giving and sustaining forces of a rural world. The city-dweller and the suburbanite have reinvented the wheel, have recreated it as an aesthetically satisfying icon metaphorising a "Golden Age" now out of their reach--the age of the wheel and cart. In that vision--undoubtedly encouraged by the folklorist--the wheel, the cauldron, the ploughshare, the milk-can have become beautiful things, the wheelwright and the blacksmith creative artists, neighbors of the painter, the sculptor, the maker of stained glass windows, neighbors also of the poet who sensitively and strategically distorts ordinary prose into exquisite poetry.

At this point cynics may well comment that the adaptation of the paraded disused items of material culture to any secondary function is really nothing but the age-old thriftiness which refuses to throw anything away just in case it might come in useful some time. As I said at the beginning, I recognize this trait and also personally understand its necessity, as well as its impact on our lives. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the phenomenon to which I have tried to draw attention is incapable of convincing explanation within such narrow limits and on a purely utilitarian level. For one thing, we are confronted with the public display of the items in question, often in arrangements of deliberate casualness. It would be erroneous, indeed misleading, therefore, simply to interpret what I have called for want of a better term "distorted function" as the private readaptation of certain material possessions no longer needed for their original use. Second, there is the choice of items to be considered, surely not arbitrary and without pattern. Third, there is the purpose to which they are put--the urge to be decorative as well as practical.

It seems to be necessary therefore to make yet another attempt at readdressing the same question of the basic motivation involved in such secondary, often decorative, always distorted and almost always public display of material symbols of a rural past in an urban, more often than not suburban, setting.⁵ As I see it--and I do not think I am hypersensitive in this respect or over-interpretative--we are encountering here not so much a nostalgic, but an accidental preservation of the outdated, as a playful but deliberate infusion of the anachronistic into a contemporary or "modern" context. Presumably one of the major reasons for this backward-looking conservation is a distrust of innovational change, caused by a disabling sense of dislocation from reassuring habit and friendly habitat. In other words, what on the surface looks like practical antiquarianism is really the recreation of a phantom past, by people who can afford to do so, in a complete reversal of economic necessity. The inability to come to terms with the present is translated on the one hand, into a subconscious, fairly restrained, seemingly sporadic, light-hearted but serious assault on the newfangled menace of contemporariness, and, on the other, into an almost macabre love affair with the romanticized days gone by. Dislike of, disappointment with the present, inability to cope result in a yearning for a touch of paradise, for a glimpse of Eden before the Fall.

I am therefore inclined to see in many of these items not so much an escape from an undesirable modernity as a reaching out to recapture a kinder social climate, an ancestral atmosphere, an attempt to release past goodness in order to revitalize and harness it as an influential ingredient of the preposterous, unprepossessing present. As a barricade of emblematic symbols to ward off destructive forces (wheels as boundary markers!), as hex

signs to charm the powers of leveling and de-individualization, they are, as it were, outcries of bewildered folk trying to impose a mistaken but compellingly textured mode of rural civility on a suburban wilderness. When the extended path from the past to the present is seen as the fragmentation of original wholeness, an ever increasing deterioration of values, accompanied by the loss of vital substance through brutalizing industrialization and the urban cheapening of human worth, then this genuinely desired but nevertheless pathetic return to what is imagined to have been but never was becomes, in my view, quite understandable. There is verbally inarticulate envy here which tries to become visually and tangibly articulate. In a modern, threatening world of splintering, fracture, humiliation, a blurred vision can easily focus on no more than the blemishes on a bespattered innocence, and one can reinterpret the past as a time before the profit-inspired, refractory deflection of a natural relationship to the pleasant and of an easy application of the pleasing, when now there are only the awkward wrenchings of functional beauty.

It is quite unlikely that all these factors are present in the background of our phenomenon all the time; it is even less likely that they are always consciously acknowledged or brought to light in rational reflection, but it seems to make sense that, in the process of reintegrating the broken, reminders, mementos, symbols of an age of innocent and beautiful completeness (white wheels!) should be displayed in front of suburban villas and bungalows, a cognitive and existential iconography deployed as a counter-measure to the perceived insensitive rape of the unerringly wholesome. Other material items displayed in similar places in a similar fashion, while performing the same task less centrally and

less forcefully, are nevertheless tellingly reinforcing such endeavors.

Although most tangible and visible in the realm of the material aspects of culture, the phenomenon of "distorted function" is of course, by no means confined to those aspects. We can only, in this context, hint at a few non-material examples: the waulking song, the spinning song, the milking song, the butter-making song, the rowing song, the sea shanty have long become songs of entertainment only, without any connection with the kind of work which they used to help along or made possible by their rhythm, melodic shape, and textual contents. The women fulling the cloth have turned into an audience perhaps joining in the chorus. Or, without subscribing to the view that all folktales are broken-down myths, mythological tales have often become mere narratives, devoid of their pedagogical function and cosmological framework. Life-giving or destroying incantations have been turned into mere sayings or children's jump rope rhymes, seasonal religious customs into gestures of ethnicity, rites of passage into certificates and diplomas.

There is no reason why such transformations should be viewed with devolutionary despair, as long as the fact is recognized that in addition to the vertical movement of items from cultural level to cultural level, both up and down, and in addition also to the various phases and strategies of folk-acculturation making horizontal intercultural diffusion possible, there is an intra-folk-cultural process which through the phenomenon of lateral functional distortion not only prevents the extinction or obsolescence of items of folklife but also changes them into something new and different, the milk-can into a letterbox support, the cauldron into a flower-

pot, the bathtub into a garden shrine, the myth into a folktale, the wheel into a folk icon.⁶ The sooner we examine, analyze, and understand this process, resulting in the survival of folk items in seemingly dysfunctional contexts, the sooner we will know why so much folklife is still alive today, when otherwise it would have been no more than cultural scrap.⁷

NOTES

1 I first offered a preliminary paper on this subject at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society at Portland, Oregon, in 1974. Since then, I have talked about the topic on many occasions, formally and informally. The present article is therefore the result of a long process of discussion and comment.

2 See, for example, Geoffrey Leech, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (London: Longman, 1969).

3 They would therefore satisfy Henry Glassie's dictum that "the artifact . . . simultaneously gives pleasure and serves some practical social or economic end" ("Folk Art," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972], p. 253).

4 The same symbolism can, however, be found elsewhere. I have much material, for example, from Britain, Germany, and Finland, but I have never seen any illustrations in print.

5 George Ewart Evans has the following observation in his book The Pattern under the Plough (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), with regard to East Anglia: "I have noticed that more of the old farm tools and the domestic equipment associated with the former culture have been kept and adapted to secondary uses in those areas bordering the towns than in the isolated districts where change was delayed even to as late as the Second World War, but having arrived was quicker and more complete" (p. 256).

6 After this paper had been completed, my attention was drawn to a brief article in Schönere Heimat: Organ des Bayerischen Landesvereins für Heimatpflege, Heft 4/77 (Munich, 1977):452-54. Under the heading "Der Unflug mit dem Wagenrad . . ." (The Abuse of the Wagon Wheel . . .), the author, Rudolf Seitz, comes to similar conclusions with regard to the wheel as a decorative item. He does, however, do two things which I have tried to avoid. On the one hand, he makes an aesthetic value judgment and declares such decorations to be in "bad taste"; on the other, he generalizes the symbolism of the wheel beyond its immediate context and, partially following C. G. Jung, considers the possibility of its representing the notion of a "divine sun."

7 As a postscript, here is another news item from the New York Times, this time of 25 July 1974:

LONDON (UPI) - The firm of Anne Hugessen, makers of chastity belts has been placed into liquidation by its creditors. - Officials said the company's failure had nothing to do with the so-called permissive era. - Hugessen's belts have in recent years more often been used as ice buckets and plant holders than for the purpose for which they were designed in medieval times. - In fact, Prince Charles bought two belts last year to use as toilet-roll holders, a spokesman for the company said. - The belts are exported to 27 different countries - including the Virgin Islands - and the biggest buyer were Americans, the firm said.

Obviously, there is a limit to what the process of distorted function can do for the survival of an item--at least with regard to chastity belts!