

The End of Folklore and the Task of Thinking

Gregory Hansen

In 1966 Martin Heidegger published an essay entitled “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.” Intended as a criticism of his monumental work *Being and Time*, Heidegger asks his reader to consider the question: “What is meant by the talk about the end of philosophy?” (1977 [1966]:374). Heidegger writes that the “end of philosophy” can be interpreted in various ways. In one sense, “the end” can signify a completion or culmination, but in another sense “an end” can mean a goal for the task of thinking. To what extent should folklorists now be asking ourselves a permutation of these Heideggerian questions: what is meant by the talk about the end of folklore, and what task is reserved for thinking at the end of folklore as a discipline?

The end of folklore as a discipline began when the subject matter of folklore was broadened. As the trope “this is folklore, we should be studying it” became proclaimed about new topics ranging from letters in *Penthouse Forum* to washing dishes in Denmark, attacks on the purists of the discipline climbed in an Oedipal overthrow of Dorsonian thinking. Slowly a new trope began to emerge: “our definitions of ‘folklore’ are ethnocentric, nationalistic, and colonialist.” In various sectors, the subject matter became so wide open that everything was proclaimed as folklore and *Saturday Night Fever* has been heralded as the quintessential study of 1970s American folklife. The problem is that if everything is now “folklore,” then nothing is “folklore,” for the term now carries with it little more distinctiveness than connotations of anachronism.

The problem with this loosening is that those who critique the older definitions of “folklore” rarely offer new definitions that satisfactorily resolve the problems implicated in the use of earlier terms. Furthermore, their ideology of globalism has an ethnocentric bias, and their new terms do little more than replace one hegemonic, hierarchical, and colonialist set of categories with another set of terms for order that do not remove such biases.

As the subject matter of the folkloristic canon became looser, the loose canon further freed the loose cannons. Not only could anything be studied as folklore, but folklorists began vehemently arguing that we need to pay attention to work done in related disciplines. It seems strange that in the clamor of critiquing folkloristic scholarship, few folklorists consider that perhaps there are folkloristic ideas, methods, and theories that can call into

question the key assumptions and methods used by scholars outside of folklore. Rather than reading the work of folklorists and developing an original theory of folklore, we have continued the tradition of developing ideas from every other discipline but our own.

As the postmodernists comment on the decentering of subjects and the decentering of theory and the resulting fragmentation of knowledge that emerges from various author-functions, they might pay attention to arguments offered by Richard Dorson, that a decentered subject in an academic discipline will create decentered theories.

The postmodernist zeal to problematize and deconstruct the tripartite construct of folk/mass/classical creates more problems than it solves. A major one is that opening up the field to any subject means that genres and subjects typically examined only by folklorists can be overlooked or denigrated as "moldy fig." Although old-time folk traditions such as quilt making, banjo picking, and fiddling are sometimes denigrated as the stereotypical subject matter of folklore, it is curious that there are no significant articles on these subjects in major serials such as the *Journal of American Folklore*. As a result of this decentering, what becomes centered is the subjective reflections and concerns of the postmodernist cultural critic. When a folklorist is duped by the rhetoric of proponents of the postmarxist cultural critique, he or she can easily forget that there is more to cultural study than an analysis of the political economy of cultural production or an exploration of autoethnography and ethnographic navel gazing. Enough has been written about the subjective qualities of the social construction of folklore. What folklorists need to develop is a workable center for the discipline.

In direct defiance of postmodernist cultural theory, we may have a center that we must recognize, own, and develop. The folklorists' urge to celebrate what is excellent and time-honored in human creative expression is courageous in a cynical, even nihilistic, academic environment. In this respect, a humane, folkloristic inquiry into the merger of community, creativity, and tradition stands as our unique center. It is a center that is a direct challenge to the cynicism and despair that has become the center in decentered cultural study.

Perhaps it is the folklorists' task of thinking to remind other contemporary scholars of the hazards of a decentered subject and decentered theories in their disciplines. I like knowing that there are experts on Irish folklife. I like knowing that there are experts on nineteenth-century ballads. I like knowing that there are experts on boat building in the Ohio River Valley. I like knowing that there are folklorists who know the canon of ballads, fiddle tunes, blues songs, and tall tales better than any cultural critic in the world. Few scholars in any other discipline are willing to devote their intellect and energy to the topics that have conventionally been studied by folklorists. In this respect, folklore is compensatory education.

Rather than this era marking the end of folklore, our task of thinking about folklore has only started. If we wish to make ourselves matter within academe, we must begin to take the task of thinking seriously. Rather than glibly and joyfully arguing “this is folklore, so we need to start studying it,” we have to articulate why we need to study this material. Folklorists need to determine what is unique in folkloristic perspectives and develop theories that provide us with a workable center. If we do not, we will truly reach the end of folklore and have far different opportunities to engage in the task of thinking.

References Cited

Heidegger, Martin. 1977 [1966]. The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking. In *Basic Writings*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, pp. 374–92. New York: Harper and Row.