

OPEN FORUM

Postmodernism vs. Postmodernity: Implications for Folklore Studies

John D. Dorst
University of Wyoming

Good academic discourse is characterized by honest conviction bred of sound research and reasoned analysis. American folklore studies can certainly boast its share of such discourse. However, it is rare to find in any academic field expressions of genuinely passionate commitment—unabashed assertions of deep personal investment in ideas and methods, to the point that these assertions are as much affirmations of moral faith as expressions of scholarly principles. Henry Glassie's 1989 Presidential Address to the American Folklore Society was, it seems to me, a notable moment of just such passionate commitment. I think we can anticipate plenty of healthy discussion and debate to proceed from this address, for it was provocative to the same degree it was passionate. The following remarks are prompted by a dilemma that Glassie's address posed for me, or rather sharpened for me, since I had been dimly aware of this dilemma for some time. I offer an account of my problem here because it is not just personal, but also professional/scholarly. I believe it bears some relation to the current state of the field of folklore.

The cause of my discomfort was a brief, though well-received comment toward the end of the eloquently panoramic address. In suggesting the moves to be made for realizing his vision of folklore's future, Glassie enjoined his audience to forsake any infatuation it might have with this "foppish" palaver about postmodernism.¹ He was roundly applauded for this sentiment. As someone who had recently

committed himself in print to an interest in the so-called postmodern debate (Dorst 1989), I felt more than a little discomfited.

Upon reflection it seems to me that my consternation was less a result of Glassie's comment, which made sense in a very specific way within the context of his previous discussion, than from the seemingly broad approval displayed by the AFS membership. Had American folklorists somewhere been contemplating the array of issues associated with the term postmodernism and come to the consensus implied by their applause? Where were the discussions carried on—certainly not in the pages of the familiar journals.² More likely, it seems to me, is that the audience's sentiments reflect a very general distaste, widespread in the academy, for the excesses, the arrogance and the airiness so characteristic of both postmodern discourse and discourses on postmodernity. If this is the case, then it might be useful to sort out the main "versions" of postmodernity to assess more dispassionately whether there is anything worth considering further and, more specifically, whether there is anything particularly relevant to folklorists.

Steven Connor has recently pointed out a basic distinction between two prevailing accounts of the postmodern, "one of the emergence of postmodernism out of modernism, the other of the emergence of postmodernity out of modernity" (1989:27). The former has to do with rather narrow developments in the arts and media. It refers to supposedly new cultural trends and styles typified by a highly reflexive sensibility and a tendency toward the disruption of expected stabilities in literary and visual representation, among other things. Doctorow's novels and Rauschenberg's collages are frequently cited examples. At its thinnest, this postmodernism is a self-identified (some would say self-serving) cultural movement dependent for legitimacy upon distinguishing itself from a preceding period which, by implication, it has superseded.

Given the larger context of his address, I feel justified in understanding Glassie's comment as a response to this version of the postmodern. He enjoins folklorists to find common cause with those great modernist figures in the arts (Yeats, Joyce, Kandinsky, etc.) who turned to the folk for esthetic renewal and critical perspective. Folklorists have much to gain in seeing themselves as participants in the ongoing modernist project. The apparent claim of the postmodernists that this project is at an end needs to be dismissed.

If this is a fair characterization of his point, then Glassie's admonition is apt and ought to be heeded. It does not profit folklorists to affiliate themselves with the fashionable postmodernism

defined as a self-proclaimed cultural style, though this is not to say folklorists couldn't have a legitimate analytical interest in the socio-historical phenomenon of this self-conscious movement. It is, however, Connor's second version of the postmodern, *postmodernity* rather than *postmodernism*, that mostly deserves consideration by folklorists. *Postmodernity* here refers to a whole social, cultural, political and economic regime that seems different enough from the historical circumstances of thirty (twenty? forty?) years ago as to deserve its own designation. It would be more accurate, I think, to refer to the social and historical circumstances of advanced consumer capitalism than to *postmodernity*, but in the interest of economy this tag is not a bad one. It is acceptable in part precisely because the concept designated is not wedded to the word, as it is in the case of *postmodernism*.

It is my assumption that folklorists have a legitimate interest in the conditions of their own historical moment. This being the case, we need to entertain new possibilities for our objects of analysis and new concepts appropriate to these objects. We especially need new ways of understanding how unprecedented commodity forms and relations are affecting those domains that we generally consider our bailiwick as folklorists, namely, the vernacular spheres of experience. It seems to me no longer adequate, for example, simply to see vernacular culture and consumer or commercial culture as straightforward antagonists. This model seems to be a convention of our field that leads us to construct a certain range of scenarios to describe cultural dynamics: commercial culture displaces or destroys folk culture, or commercial culture commodifies, and thereby appropriates folk expression, or, folk culture heroically resists and perhaps evades the corrosive effects of the commodity, or, most interesting, folk culture finds ways to appropriate the dominant culture and turn it against itself.

These processes certainly do operate, but the models we apply to describe them no longer cover the full range of possibilities. New forces and relations of production, new technologies and mechanisms, new institutions and agents, and ever more refined manifestations of the commodity are making possible unprecedented social and cultural arrangements. For example, under the conditions of *postmodernity*, the spirit of commodity seems capable of penetrating to the very core of the vernacular domain and installing itself there comfortably, without either disrupting that domain or being appropriated by it. Rather than a commodification of the vernacular, advanced consumer capitalism allows for, and perhaps even requires, a vernacularization

of the commodity. This process, and others related to it, ought to be of concern to folklorists.

And the case of Connor's second version of the postmodern as a legitimate interest for folklorists can be made not just on the grounds that we need to keep vigilant for emergent cultural conditions, but also in the recognition that we have something to offer that is currently lacking in the postmodern debate. We could bring to this debate the ethnographic expertise and the sensitivity to cultural specificities that are now so conspicuously absent. Without question the most cited theorist of postmodernity as a historical formation is Fredric Jameson. In his seminal statement (1984), Jameson's method is to isolate instances from the arts and media which display the characteristic traits of postmodern expression and experience: preoccupation with surfaces, emotional depthlessness, schizophrenic concentration on the present moment, rampant historicism through the superficial evocation of past styles, and so on. He then associates these properties in some vague way with the forces of multinational capitalism.

Most discussions of postmodernity operate at this level. By bringing to bear a sophisticated attention to ethnographic specificities in local circumstances, folklorists could enrich the conversation immeasurably. If the term postmodernity names something real in our historical experience, then its operations must be manifest in actual situations, with particular forms mediated by concrete institutions. This is where folklorists could appropriately enter the discussion. It is certainly a position not currently occupied.

The agencies of postmodernity also have implications for our considerations of folklore in the narrow sense of genres, texts and performances. In particular, the increasingly complex information technologies should cause us to reconsider some of our received wisdom. For example, the conflicting notions that, on the one hand, mass communications tend to supplant folk expression and, on the other, that these mass channels are merely neutral conduits allowing for faster and wider dissemination of folklore, both ignore the possibility of a more radical transformation. They miss the point that forms we associate with folk expression are coming to inhabit entirely new kinds of social space, ones in which our assumptions about text, context and performance are confounded.

It seems to me now that the most important thing I took with me from Henry Glassie's address was his reminder that the modernist project was (and is) at its heart a critical project, one concerned with judgment and transformation. The postmodernist enterprise, certainly

in the first version, but also in its more complex manifestation, is much less certain about its role in socio-cultural critique. It is after all an enterprise inherently suspicious of any position which claims the sort of moral stability from which broad judgments could be made. Perhaps here too folklorists have something to offer. Perhaps what is called for under current historical conditions is a more local scale of critique, a form of "tactical" critique applied in the same specific circumstances that folklorists are equipped to address ethnographically. Whether this piecemeal approach is adequate to broader goals of social transformation is uncertain, but at least it would allow us, under complex and confused historical circumstances, to continue to ask that most serious of our questions: "Must things be as they are?" (Glassie 1983:382)

Notes

¹ Since I do not have access to the text of the address, my characterization of Glassie's comment is approximate.

² One does find the word postmodernism popping up in recent years in paper titles at the AFS meetings, and Mark Workman (1989) has recently addressed in print some issues pertaining to postmodernism and folklore. But there is nothing approaching sustained discussion and exploration of the relevant topics. (My thanks to George Schoemaker for the Workman reference.)

References Cited

- Connor, Steven. 1989. *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Dorst, John D. 1989. *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Glassie, Henry. 1983. Folkloristic Study of the Artifact: Objects and Objectives. In *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard Dorson, pp. 376-383. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1984. Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. *New Left Review* 146:53-92.
- Workman, Mark E. 1989. Folklore in the Wilderness: Folklore and Postmodernism. *Midwestern Folklore* 15:5-14.