



Folklore in American Literature: A Postscript

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FOLKLORE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A POSTSCRIPT:—In our symposium on "Folklore in Literature" in last year's JOURNAL, I commented on the problem of "Identifying Folklore in American Literature." Meanwhile, the flood of articles describing the debt of American authors to folk materials rolls on. For the record I add the references to these new studies on Bacheller, Eggleston, Faulkner, Irving, Caroline Kirkland, Kroll, Longfellow, Taliaferro, Thoreau, and Twain, to supplement my bibliographical note in *JAF* (LXX [1957], 22-23, note 13).

Several of the present studies follow the course I attacked of relying exclusively on unsupported internal evidence to make their case. A would-be authority picks up *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Sketch Book*, turns its pages, notes when an owl hoots or the word "ghost" occurs, and strings the page references together to compose a learned article. If not overcome by the rigorous demands of such research, our folk critic may reach for a Botkin treasury to furnish a footnote. As a clinching technique, he concludes the essay with a sonorous paragraph reiterating half a dozen times or more the dependence of his author upon folklore. Yet he has never done any field work, has read no field collections, and knows nothing of type or motif indexes.

I refer particularly to the articles by Frantz on Mark Twain, and by Rodes on Washington Irving. There is plenty of folk matter in *Huckleberry Finn*, but Frantz judges folklore purely by instinct. One reference to the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*—a poor place to go for regional American folklore—is his sole folkloristic documentation. Not even so familiar a work as N. N. Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill, 1926), appears in a footnote to save him from the egregious error of saying that all Nigger Jim's folk-knowledge—like telling the bees!—comes straight from Africa. Actually, Nigger Jim's beliefs are mostly English (Puckett, p. 82, note 7.) A splendid example of Southern Negro lore occurring at the outset, the belief in witch-riding, Frantz passes by. When Tom Sawyer hangs Nigger Jim's hat on a limb above the sleeping slave, Jim awakes to believe himself witch-ridden, and enlarges on his experience to gaping fellow slaves, thus giving himself special status. (Ch. 2. For current examples of the tradition, see my "Negro Witch Stories on Tape," *Midwest Folklore*, II [1952], 229-241.) At his most ridiculous, Frantz declares that Twain delineates the character of Mrs. Loftus through folklore, because she detects Huck as a boy in woman's dress by watching him thread a needle and throw a lump of coal at a rat. Observation of motor behavior is thus folklore. Finally Frantz asserts that the King, the Duke, and Huck continually talk in proverbs, and gives a number of examples with no reference material whatsoever, apparently on the theory that any unorthodox utterance constitutes a proverb. When Huck says a cave looks as "big as two or three rooms bunched together," this is proverbial. Obviously the editors of *American Literature* do not demand the same documentation for folklore they insist on for literary history.

The Rodes article commits similar faults, and the wonder is that it should be printed as a lead article in one folklore journal and reprinted as such in another. A series of naïve assertions states that Irving was drenched in New York folklore. When Rodes surmises that Irving could well have taken *The Devil and Tom Walker* straight from the lips of the folk, we surmise that she never heard or read an oral folk tale text. When she declares that so sophisticated a satirical writing as Knickerbocker's *History of New York* is near the "folk level," we can simply gasp. She could have benefited from Hoffman's authoritative piece on "Irving's Use of American Folklore in 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow'" in *PMLA* in 1953.

Still other essays rely wholly or largely on internal evidence. The article on folkways in Caroline Kirkland's minor classic of Michigan pioneer life, *A New Home—Who'll Follow?*, excerpts her references to dress, travel, inns, log houses, breadmaking, borrowing, churches, lawsuits, and personalities in backcountry Michigan of the 1830's. There is no comparative material. Nor is there in the brief comment on "Folklore in Eben Holden,"

but this is an unpretentious and useful note simply calling the attention of folklorists to the yarns of Uncle Eb in Irving Bacheller's novel. Penrod could make a still stronger case for folk humor in Taliaferro, for alone of the Southern humorists he describes informants and presents tale texts in a manner suggestive of a modern collector. Penrod gives specific examples of folk humor in Taliaferro, while Hoadley applies the phrase "folk humor" or its equivalent ("regional, frontier, tall tale humor") twenty-two times in seven pages to the novels of Faulkner without any illustration of what he has in mind.

Turning from the guesswork method of internal evidence to the use of biographical evidence, we find valuable contributions. Reichart fully documents Irving's contacts with German legends in an article that points up all Rodes fails to do. Loomis uncovers the journal notes of Thoreau which show his live interest in local legends, customs, and expressions. The prize illustration of biographical evidence is written by a novelist on his own work. After Archer Taylor employed the corroborative method to document proverbial material in the novels of Harry Harrison Kroll, Kroll himself came forward to explain where he learned and how he used proverbs. He provides a splendid statement of the manner in which the creative writer draws from his fund of subconscious memories and experiences for traditional matter that may shape his characters and clothe his story. Kroll describes the sharecroppers living outside Dyersburg, Tennessee, and the "middle-class two-mule family" at Dixon Mills, Alabama, from whom he heard "simple strong words, earthy metaphors, barnyard vulgarity, and proverbs." But he also says—and let the folklorists take note—that some odd sounding twists of old proverbs which Taylor could not locate were simply his mother's peculiar phrases.

The only example, and a successful one, presenting all three kinds of evidence I suggested—internal, biographical, and corroborative—is the fully documented study by Davis on *Hiawatha*. One would prefer that she had relied more on original collections of Ojibwa tales, and less on Stith Thompson's anthology. But the analysis of poetic mood and structure, the investigation of Longfellow's sources, and the comparison of Indian tales with his poetic treatment support a convincing thesis. Davis concludes that Longfellow missed the deeper tragic view of Indian animistic myths in settling for a happy primeval poem directed toward white readers.

Reading these studies strengthens in my own mind the views I expressed in the symposium. I must enter my disagreement with Hoffman's assertion there that my demands for evidence will limit the folklore critic of literature to regional and provincial authors, and deny him access to the mainstreams. For one thing I do not understand this big-city criterion of literary importance, even recognizing that Hoffman resided in New York when he expressed his views. Nor do I share his definition of folklore in terms of remoteness from the cosmopolis. Ethnic folk traditions flourish in urban centers and serve the writer. We can certainly document the debt of major American authors like Mark Twain, Melville, and Hawthorne to living folk traditions. The term "provincial" strikes me as unhappy, reflecting the literary reputation of the moment. Rowland Robinson deserves recognition not because he describes cracker barrel story telling, but because he caught the moods, the country characters, the leisurely rhythm, the focal points of village interest, and the accents of "idlesome talk" (as Kroll puts it) in a Vermont hillside town. There is humor in the speech and behavior of his Danvis folk delicious as anything in Mark Twain. But Hoffman errs when he says Robinson is simply faithfully recording folkways. Let him just compare a tape recorded transcript of a tale telling session with one of Robinson's artistically drawn yarnfests, building up through point and counterpoint to a striking climax. Fourteen critics wrote prefaces and introductions to the centennial edition of Robinson's works in 1937, each paying tribute to Robinson as a writer, but not one recognized his use of folklore. The folklore critic can considerably deepen our awareness of Robinson's materials and techniques.

If we fail first to identify and document as accurately as possible the contact of authors

with folk traditions, we cannot make critical judgments on their use of folklore motifs and structural patterns. Poet and novelist and playwright fit to their own imaginative purposes the folk materials they know, and critics must tread warily to distinguish folk from literary or personal inspiration. No one has proved himself more skilled and sensitive in such studies than Hoffman. But there is a danger that the search for structural symbols may become as seductive as the quest for ritual myths.

NOTE

IRVING BACHELLER: Charles E. Samuels, "Folklore in Eben Holden," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, XIII (1957), 100-103. EDWARD EGGLESTON: Archer Taylor, "Proverbial Materials in Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*," *Studies in Folklore*, ed. W. Edson Richmond (Bloomington, Indiana, 1957), pp. 262-270. WILLIAM FAULKNER: Frank M. Hoadley, "Folk Humor in the Novels of William Faulkner," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, XXIII (1957), 75-82. WASHINGTON IRVING: Walter A. Reichart, "Washington Irving's Interest in German Folklore," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, XIII (1957), 181-192; Sara P. Rodes, "Washington Irving's Use of Traditional Folklore," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XIX (1956), 143-153, reprinted in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, XIII (1957), 3-15. CAROLINE KIRKLAND: John C. McCloskey, "Back-Country Folkways In Mrs. Kirkland's *A New Home—Who'll Follow?*" *Michigan History*, XI (1956), 297-308. HARRY HARRISON KROLL: Harry Harrison Kroll, "How I Collect Proverbial Materials for My Novels," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, XXIII (1957), 1-5; Archer Taylor, "Proverbial Materials in Two Novels by Harry Harrison Kroll," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, XXII (1956), 39-52; Archer Taylor, "Proverbial Material in Two More Novels by Harry Harrison Kroll," *ibid.*, 73-84. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW: Rose M. Davis, "How Indian is Hiawatha?" *Midwest Folklore*, VII (1957), 5-25. HARDEN TALIAFERRO: James H. Penrod, "Harden Taliaferro, Folk Humorist of North Carolina," *Midwest Folklore*, VI (1956), 147-153. HENRY THOREAU: C. Grant Loomis, "Henry David Thoreau as Folklorist," *Western Folklore*, XVI (1957), 90-106. MARK TWAIN: Ray W. Frantz, "The Role of Folklore in *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Literature*, XXVIII (1956), 314-327.

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THE ONE-EYED ONES:—Is there some kind of life on the other planets of our universe, or even in outer galactic space? If so, what sort of form does this life take? These, and many other related questions, are the preoccupation of much mental exercise in our present day and can be seen expressed in the great increase of science fiction concerning life from other worlds in magazines, movies and TV.

This contemplation upon possible forms of life other than our own has not been limited to the present however. The human mind throughout the ages has fashioned innumerable varieties of superhuman, human, and subhuman forms. One particularly interesting kind of these is that of one-eyedness.

The One-Eyed Ones are those mythological creatures possessing but a single eye. In general, this eye is round (hence the term *Cyclopia* 'round eye') and is located in the middle of the forehead. Frequently, it is larger than a usual eye, more than likely in compensation for being single rather than paired. Figure 1 illustrates the physiogomy of a One-Eyed One as depicted and described in the records of various peoples.

The Fire Demon of Babylonian tradition was one such. The Chinese locate the land of the One-Eyed People beyond the "North Sea." More familiar to all, however, is Polyphemus, the cyclops of Greek mythology, who captured Ulysses and his men, and who was one of a group of such cyclopeans living together on a distant island.

The question arises as to the possible origin of such a concept of form as this. Is the One-Eyed One a pure thought abstraction, or is it based upon some real fact such as the observation of either an actual, free living, one-eyed creature or a pathological specimen? One might also ask whether or not this concept has originated but once and been carried