

THE FOLK PARODIST

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Although North American folklorists such as C. Grant Loomis, George Monteiro, and Jan Brunvand have often noted the existence of traditional parodies, they have been reluctant to consider such items "folk" parodies.¹ Folk parodies, or parodies traditionally communicated in small groups, have too often been treated with disdain or apology by folklorists who, like students of literature, have maintained certain value judgements concerning the inferiority of the form. Hence, the excusatory tone of Duncan Emrich in his discussion of the "Songs of the Western Miners" when he admits that the majority of such songs are modern parodies and that "it would be wrong to assume that [these] songs being created and sung today can — musically and poetically — compare with the traditional songs of early California."² While John Greenway in his introduction to *Folksongs of Protest* does indicate that many songs of labour protest are parodies, throughout his work he substitutes terms like "borrowing" and "adaptation" for parody, as though he did not want to diminish the status of the material in his presentation.³

Such examples of the reluctance of folklorists to discuss parody affirmatively are based on three intellectual inclinations within the discipline. Firstly, the fact that parodies are developed on the basis not just of traditional items but on forms which stem from cultivated art and popular culture as well, has meant that they have been neglected by folklorists committed to item-oriented collection approaches who have striven toward the amassing of "pure" materials, uncontaminated by high-brow or mass-media intrusions. Secondly, as Dundes has pointed out, it has been the value judgement of many folklorists that the older the folklore the better it is, since the nature of folklore is that it deteriorates or devolves.⁴ According to this devolutionary view, then, every parody has a known predecessor and therefore all parodies are, to a degree, inferior products. Anyone with a passion for oral antiques and *Ur* forms will necessarily tend to malign parodies as corruptions or copies.

Lastly, a major difficulty with the term parody as viewed by folklorists is that, unlike most genres in folklore, parody, as a noun and a verb, refers to both a product and a process, a process which as understood by academics is akin to plagiarism. The tacit acknowledgement of original sources involved in the mimicry of parody is insufficient for students who consider such works feeble imitations. Notwithstanding the fact that folklorists are renowned for their devotion to the analysis of oral tradition, they are, as all scholars, devotees of the printed page, and the characteristics of that medium have often interfered with their understanding of oral communication and the transmission of oral products. As Harold Adams Innis noted in 1950, "It is scarcely possible for

¹Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: Norton, 1968), p.108; C. Grant Loomis, "Mary Had a Parody: A Rhyme of Childhood in Folk Tradition," *Western Folklore*, 17 (1958), 45-51; George Monteiro, "Parodies of Scripture, Prayer, and Hymn," *Journal of American Folklore*, 77 (1964), 45-52.

²Duncan Emrich, "Songs of the Western Miners," *California Folklore Quarterly*, 1 (1942), 213-31.

³John Greenway, *American Folk Songs of Protest* (New York: Barnes, 1960), p.6.

⁴Alan Dundes, "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory," *Journal of The Folklore Institute*, 6, (1969), 5-19.

generations disciplined in the written and printed tradition to appreciate the oral tradition."⁵ Unlike the content of oral communication, the tangibility of writing and print have made worldwide copyright laws possible, a situation whereby individuals acquire property rights over configurations of works. Debates in North American folkloristics such as that between Gershon Legman and Charles Seeger over "who owns folklore?" are predicated on folklorists' indisposition to the clash which results when the biases of oral/aural sensory media come in conflict with the biases of the technological media of writing, print, and electronic recordings.⁶ Folklorists find themselves, therefore, in a paradoxical situation, because as part of a scholarly community they possess value judgements concerning individuality and the uniqueness of verbal expression. Through their analyses of the printed page students of literature can consistently condemn imitative practices, but the folklorist examines a subject, a characteristic of which is verbal repetition without individual property rights. Folklorists' posture as academics can foredoom their conclusions and such has been the case with folk parody, for in cultural circumstances in which oral/aural communication is primary, plagiarism as a concept makes no sense.

The essence of folk parody is that, as an artistic form of communication, it is built upon a pre-existing aesthetic structure and that in this building process the content or meaning of the initial structure is substantively but not substantially altered. That is, it is altered to the extent that the former sentiment and significance is still recognizable to the creator and often to the performer and audience as well. In terms of intended audience response, two polar types of folk parody may be distinguished along with intermediate forms: firstly, humorous folk parody (intention of laughter), and secondly, serious folk parody (intention of reflection). Both types have attracted the attention of North American folklorists.

Humorous folk parody

The standard literary sense of parody as comic ridicule is also applicable to many forms in oral tradition. Such items out of context may appear to make fun or mock a given piece of cultivated art, popular culture, or folklore for its own sake. As caricatures and burlesques they imitate to an extent but then exhibit sharp contrasts with original models, the incongruities of which evoke laughter. In this regard, Alan Dundes has pointed out that much metafolklore, or the "folklore of folklore," takes the form of humorous parody by maintaining an original structure with the addition of an element of comic surprise which functions as a critical comment on the initial folklore item. More directly germane to humorous folk parody is C. Grant Loomis's exhaustive study of comic parodic rhymes based on Sarah Josepha Hall's "Mary Had a Little Lamb."⁸ While Loomis has culled most of his examples from journalistic sources he makes it clear from internal evidence that many of the parodies he cites have existed in oral tradition. A zeal to associate college songs with

⁵Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p.9.

⁶G. Legman, "Who Owns Folklore?" *Western Folklore*, 21 (1962), 1-13; Charles Seeger, "Who Owns Folklore? — A Rejoinder," *Western Folklore*, 21 (1962), 93-102.

⁷Alan Dundes, "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism," *The Monist*, 1 (1966), pp.505-16.

⁸Loomis, *op cit*.

folklore has prevented Richard Reuss's *An Annotated Field Collection of Songs from the American College Student Oral Tradition* from identifying his largely humorous assemblage as a group of parodies, although in another commentary on the subject, Herbert Halpert has not hesitated to use the parodial label for such materials.⁹ Perhaps the best collection of humorous folk parodies from oral sources is George Monteiro's "Parodies of Scripture, Prayer, and Hymn," a largely uncritical but unique contribution to folklore scholarship.¹⁰

Serious folk parody

In spite of the fact that they have not labeled them "folk parodies," many North American folklorists have used the term parody to refer to traditional or popular tunes which are wedded to reworked texts. As in the sixteenth century "parody Mass" such usage simply refers to borrowed material. Sometimes lamenting unrequited love, celebrating heroic deeds or depicting disasters, such folk parodies as presented by folklorists are often serious in content. Thus, Hand, Cutts, Wylder, and Wylder present extensive sections of "parodies of folksongs" and "parodies of popular songs" in their "Songs of the Butte Miners," explaining that "the adaptation of new words to existing folk-song tunes is part and parcel of the process of oral transmission."¹¹ Most of their collection consists of sober and sometimes somber parodies. In depicting one singer's performance, for instance, they observe that he "sang the song dolefully, and fairly choked with emotion as he sang the last stanza."¹² John Greenway makes clear by his very title of *American Folksongs of Protest* the grave tone of the songs he scrutinizes. In discussing the music for these serious texts he notes that "many are parodies of well known popular songs or adaptations of familiar folk melodies" and one reason for their ephemerality is that "it is easier to set to the basic tune new words more relevant to immediate issues and circumstances than it is to remember the old."¹³ A balance of humorous and serious parody is struck by William Wallrich's intriguing collections of Air Force song parodies in his articles "U.S. Air Force Parodies Based Upon 'The Dying Hobo'" and "U.S. Air Force Parodies: World War II and Korean War."¹⁴ Wallrich describes these songs as "parodies set to older tunes — some western, some hillbilly, some simply folk . . . they are stark, sometimes humorous and sometimes tragic reflections of the conditions in which they were created."¹⁵ Recently this work has been brought up to date by Major Joseph F. Tusso's collection of *Folksongs*

⁹Richard A. Reuss, *An Annotated Field Collection of Songs From the American College Student Oral Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Masters Thesis, 1965); Herbert Halpert, "Vitality of Tradition and Local Songs," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 3 (1951), pp.35-40.

¹⁰Monteiro, *op cit*.

¹¹Wayland D. Hand, Charles Cutts, Robert C. Wylder, Betty Wylder, "Songs of the Butte Miners," *Western Folklore*, 9 (1950), pp.1-49.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.31.

¹³Greenway, p.6.

¹⁴William Wallrich, "U.S. Air Force Parodies Based Upon 'The Dying Hobo,'" *Western Folklore*, 13 (1954), pp.236-44; William Wallrich, "U.S. Air Force Parodies: World War II and Korean War," *Western Folklore* 12 (1953), pp.270-82.

¹⁵Wallrich, 1953, p.270.

of the *American Fighter Pilot in Southeast Asia, 1967-68* which provides similar kinds of texts.¹⁶

Parodic song cycles

The foregoing citations which document the humorous and serious intentions of creators and propagators of folk parody as reflected by texts imply that the nature of parody may be fruitfully examined in terms of comparative analyses of specific examples within a given parodic genre. One such approach is that of the "parodic song cycle." A "parodic song cycle" is a group of songs which always utilize the same general melody and exhibit similar thematic and/or lyrical content. Although the tunes for these cycles always diffuse through sensory and technological media, the development of differing texts is largely a polygenetic process which occurs most frequently when a song-maker has the metrical and rhyming structure of a particular melody firmly in mind prior to the construction of the new lyrical content. Whether humorous or serious, such cycles grow from an idea contained in the original song model which acts as an inspiration for countless verse-makers. The "Wabash Cannon Ball" is an excellent case in point. Popularized through a disc recording in 1936 by Roy Acuff who sang the song from oral tradition "exactly the way I found it," the "Wabash Cannon Ball" celebrates a particular transportational vehicle and its social importance:

"Wabash Cannon Ball"

Listen to the jingle, the rumble and the roar,
As she glides along the woodland through the hills and by the shore.
Hear the mighty rush of the engine. hear the lonesome hobo's squall,
We're traveling through the jungles on the Wabash Cannon Ball.¹⁷

Similarly, truck driving Mainer Dick Curless has sung:

"The Big Wheel Cannonball"

Listen to the rumble, listen to the roar
Of the big wheels on the highway from the mountains to the shore.
Old Buffalo Bill and Casey Jones would never have the gall
To risk their fate on the interstate on the Big Wheel Cannonball.¹⁸

The same tune and lyrical idea has spawned songs of airplanes, a power project, and, as might be expected, a Newfoundlander has paid tribute to a fishing boat:

"The Boat from Kingwell"

Come listen boys I'll tell you a story if I may —
It's about the boat from Kingwell, she's all around the Bay,
Owned and crewed by Otto Peach who does a damn fine job,
He never got a compass but he still gets through the fog.

¹⁶Joseph F. Tusso, *Folksongs of the American Fighter Pilot in Southeast Asia, 1967-69* (Bloomington: Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Series, No. 7, 1971).

¹⁷Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), pp.378-79.

¹⁸Dick Corless, "Big Wheel Cannonball" (Capitol 2780).

Always crewed by one or two or maybe three or four,
And when you get in reach of her you can see Off in the door,
Now the *Bluenose* may look shabby and set down at the tail,
But she's got Atlantic power and can punch a heavy gale.

They were stormed on once at Butler's on a thirty-mile gale,
The boys went over to talk with Ott to see if he would sail.
He says, "We'll try and reach the Cove and try and hit the club,
For she's all gone dry in Kingwell and we need a Jockey Club."

At six o'clock they reached Arnold's Cove with all hands safe on board,
They went in to see Harvey Guy, he took them down the road.
At seven o'clock they reached the club, all night they made a ruck,
They were two days trying to sober up enough to leave the dock.

Now my story's ended, the *Bluenose* never stopped,
But if you want a good time, boys, just call on Captain Ott.¹⁹

Although it does not use the terminology "parodic song cycle," perhaps the best study of such a cycle is Paul J. Scheips' *Hold the Fort!: The Story of a Song From the Sawdust Trail to the Picket Line* which traces the many thematically and lyrically related texts of a hundred-year-old melody with all their varied religious, political, and economic sentiments.²⁰

Besides textual and melodic analyses, the context of parodic creation and performance needs to be examined. As Richard A. Peterson has noted, such a production-of-culture perspective focuses "on the processes by which elements of a culture are fabricated in those milieux where symbol-system production is most self-consciously the center of activity."²¹ My interviews with Angus Lane, a family man, respected civil servant, and weighmaster at the hard rock mines in Buchans, Newfoundland, have revealed that his locally known compositions of songs, poems, monologues, and dramatic skits, many of which he describes as parodies, bear strong resemblances in terms of creative techniques to his drawings and paintings.²² Whether it has been a sentiment inspired by a valentine card rhyme, a lament based on the lyric folksong

¹⁹This song, which concerns the successful efforts of the *Bluenose* in "punching" through a gale from the dry outport of Kingwell on Long Island, Placentia Bay, to the coastal town of Arnold's Cove that the crew might imbibe beer ("Jockey Club"), was sung for the author by Linda Slade from the now resettled community of Kingwell. Ms. Slade attributes the authorship of the song to Berkeley and Clem Slade (no relation), also originally from Kingwell. For an excellent view of life on Long Island by a former resident see Victor Butler's *The Little Nord Easter: Reminiscences of a Placentia Bayman*, ed. with an introduction by Wilfred W. Wareham (St. John's: MUNFLA Publications, Community Studies Series, No. 1, 1975). For fighter airplanes see Tuso, pp.9-10, 19, 21-22; Wallrich, pp.278-79. The power of the "Grand Coulee Dám" is celebrated by Woody Guthrie. Greenway, pp.291-93. Ed Cray presents an erotic ride on "The Gatesville Cannonball" in *The Erotic Muse* (New York: Pyramid, 1972), pp.19-20, 200.

²⁰Paul J. Scheips, *Hold the Fort!: The Story of a Song From the Sawdust Trail to the Picket Line* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971).

²¹Richard A. Peterson, "The Production of Culture: A Prologomenon," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 19 (1976), pp.669-84.

²²My interviews with Angus Lane are deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. Accession Number 76-393.

“White Man Let Me Go,” a strike song developed from “Thank God We’re Surrounded by Water,” a painting of Peggy’s Cove as interpreted from a postcard, or a large drawing of an entire hockey team depicted on the basis of newspaper photos, Angus’ artistic procedures exhibit a structural similarity: that of remolding a piece of art in such a manner as he consciously judges it will become more immediately pleasurable and relevant to his intended audience. It was the introduction to a group of published songs which Angus wrote for his local union while it was on strike in 1973 that prompted this paper, for in it he remarked: “These songs are parodies on other songs of greater writing ability than ours and we apologize for taking this liberty.” [sic]²³

As a folk parodist Angus need not be sorry about his creations nor should the folklorist slight him for his traditional technique of composition, for parodies contain the dynamic stuff of folklore creation.

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²³United Steelworkers of America, Local 5457, *Come Hell or High Water* (Buchans, Newfoundland: n.p., 1973), p. 4. I have recorded and produced a long playing record of these union songs, *Come Hell or High Water: Songs of The Buchans Miners*. (St. John’s: Breakwater Recordings, No. 1001, 1977).

Résumé: Peter Narváez: “*Le Parodiste traditionnel.*”

M. Narvaez atteste que la parodie, évaluée dans le domaine de la haute culture comme un produit artistique inférieur, a fait que les folkloristes ont ignoré l’importance des cycles de chansons parodies de même que la façon de les composer. L’analyse serrée d’un Terre-Neuvien folkloriste et parodiste révèle une méthode de créativité également applicable à la composition de chants, à la peinture et à l’artisanat.

BUT PARODIES ARE ACCEPTED!

Mr. Narváez is right in emphasizing the importance of parody in folk song composition, but he overstates his case when he argues that folklorists are reluctant to accept parodies as genuine folk songs. Parodic cycles include a very great many well known folk songs. Perhaps the most famous are the offshoots of “The Unfortunate Rake”: “The Young Sailor Cut Down in His Prime,” “The Bad Girl’s Lament,” “The Cowboy’s Lament,” “The St. James Infirmary Blues,” etc. Similarly the offshoots of the old English sea shanty “Spanish Ladies” include the whalers’ “Talahuano Girls,” the Australian “Brisbane Ladies,” and Newfoundland’s “The Ryans and the Pittmans.” “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” spawned “The Little Old Sod Shanty on My Claim” and “The Little Freehold on the Plain.” The hymn “Beulah Land” led to “Nebraska Land,” “Kansas Land,” “Dakota Land,” “Prairie Land,” and “Saskatchewan.” The old Scottish ballad of “Caledonia” gave rise to the lumbering “Canaday-I-O” and “Michigan-I-O,” and the Texans’ “Buffalo Skinners.” “The Roving Journeyman” inspired “Ye Maidens of Ontario” in Canada, “The Roving Gambler” in the United States, and “Dennis O’Reilly” in Australia. The sailors’ “Jack Tar Ashore” was recycled as “The Lumberman in Town.” Ireland’s “The Old Man Rocking the Cradle” became “Get Along Little Dogies.” The “Hard, Hard Times” cycle includes a host of localized versions. All these and many other parodies appear in folk-song collections with no indication that they are regarded as inferior specimens.

— Editor