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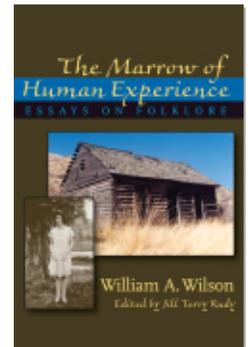
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THE DEEPER NECESSITY

Folklore and the Humanities

In his address at Los Angeles, Bert Wilson offers a grand message of hope. The style is plain and direct, the spirit soars. If folklorists would take as their goal the discovery of our common humanity, topical interests would coalesce, academic disciplines would unify, invidious distinctions among people would fade away. Within a universal humanity, cultural differences would seem trivial, the past and the present would mesh. Folklorists would assume a leading role in an advanced cultural program.

His call for unity clarified and perfected old tendencies in folkloristic thought. He locates two essential aspects of human action: the godlike capacity of the individual consciousness to bring splendid order out of chaos, and the social desire among people to communicate with consequence. That duality lies buried in every mature formulation. If we speak of folklore in terms of tradition, we acknowledge the process by which individuals reshape the shared past to create a shared future. In speaking of identity, we recognize that individuals are inviolably themselves, alone in psychic continuity, yet linked to the others with whom they identify. If we speak of performance, we concentrate on the instants when individuals forge connections with others through artful enactment.

We are born alone, we die alone: we are, each one of us, individuals. We are born, we live, we die among others: we are, all of us, members of society. That universal duality, the unity in being of the personal and social, is, at its peak, made sensate in creative acts. Those acts are called, depending upon one's presuppositions about social class, folklore or art. Call them folklore, call them art, but this is what they are: momentary fulfillments of what it is to be human.

In the days when the discipline of folklore was consolidating professionally—in the early sixties, in Dick Dorson's days—what seemed most important

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was defining folklore as something distinct. Folksong was not pop song. Folk art was not fine art. Folk history was unlike the history the professors taught. In confirming folklore as different, as complementary and compensatory, folklorists established their discipline and put it, as Bert Wilson argues, into a position of servitude—humble and marginal, capable of no more than contributing minor episodes to the big story by which the powers of the status quo preserve their authority. But when two decades had passed, and the discipline had developed, unity seemed more important than difference. Then Bert Wilson proclaimed that there was no folk literature, no fine literature, but only literature, and at exactly the same time, I wrote a long book to demonstrate that all logic of difference breaks down: the distinction between folk art and fine art is not phenomenal or qualitative, but a mere matter of academic perspective.

That was the mood of the late eighties, when Dorson was gone and the students of the sixties had hit their stride. But however laudably democratic and empirically accurate it was, it bore within it a danger. Distinctions between folklore and literature, or folk art and fine art, were founded on more than intellectual confusion. They were based on clear prejudices of class and gender and race, prejudices that have hardened more than they have diminished in time. If, in the study of literature, it makes no difference whether we study Shakespeare's plays or the narratives of Mormon missionaries, then academics will choose Shakespeare—because, as Harold Bloom unintentionally reveals in *The Western Canon*, Shakespeare raises the psychological issues that interest academics—and folklore will become less than marginal. It will be neglected, utterly. What we used to call folklore, or folk art, contained alternative virtues, the virtues of the local, communal, and sacred that shaped in opposition, in resistance to the onrush of power—virtues that, though of slight concern in the academy, must be confronted in any quest toward the universally human. The route to unity runs through difference.

The problem of diversity in unity spills through the fullness of Bert Wilson's complaint about the limitations of folkloristic practice. If we search the past for sameness, then the universally human will come clear, but the real differences between historical eras will blur into a history that is no more than a prelude to the present. We will, perhaps, distance rural life into a vanished past and turn to focus only on the urban, industrial, capitalistic creativity of the contemporary United States, even though at this time, in our time, there are more peasants in India (who work on the farm by day and sing ancient songs at night) than there are people of all classes in the United States and Europe combined. Fixed on sameness, we will surrender the options that lie in the past. The critical capacity of history will become closed to us, lost in an evolutionary trajectory that leads inevitably to ourselves. If we dismiss as romantic nationalism the energies that brought us to security, we will fail in compassion for those who, in this post-colonial world, still struggle for cultural survival against the violent forces of neocolonial expansion.

Bert Wilson was brave to put his manifesto before us. He is a great scholar, and, better than that, he is a good teacher, a good friend, a truly fine man. And he was right when he wrote. We should be hard at work in the field, out there among

the people where all of the answers abide. We should recover the courage of comparative research, crossing the divides of class and gender and race, of social and political and religious affiliation. We should seek the universally human.

And that—our common humanity—is a matter, I believe, of both the fundamental sameness upon which our right to study is founded, and the differences among people that require our study to be patient and respectful. For all people are alike in their humanity, in their individuality and their modes of social belonging—that is, in their uniqueness of personality and experience, their difference. We differ in conditions, in predicament, and what makes us most human is the will that enables endurance, that grants us the ability to turn chaos into order, and the ability to turn order into chaos.

—Henry Glassie

I SERVE ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE UTAH ARTS COUNCIL. FOR several years we have been working to make the arts (and I include arts in the humanities) a required part of the Utah secondary school curriculum. With the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake eating up larger and larger portions of Utah tax dollars for flood control, money available for the public schools—and thus for arts programs—has been pirated away. The argument has been that in these difficult times, only the most essential courses should remain in the curriculum while interesting but nonbasic courses should be eliminated. Considerable debate has been generated in the state legislature, in educational circles, and in newspaper columns over what these essential courses should be. A few months ago our governor gave his answer. Arts and humanities curricula might have to be cut back, said the governor, in order to maintain excellence in fundamentals such as reading, writing, math, science, and computer science (Browning 1986, 1).

Anyone who might find comfort in the governor's reference to reading and writing should understand that the reading referred to is, I fear, the basic skill necessary to pass a driver's license examination or read instructional manuals, and the writing is that required to apply for a job or fill out an application for a loan. However important these skills are, the reading and writing we value—that dealing artistically with significant human issues—fall under arts and humanities and must give way to courses designed to make our students computer literate.

Legislators less moderate than the governor have gone even further. For example, a resolution was recently put forth in the Utah Senate proposing that all classes in Utah's secondary schools be designated basic or nonbasic and that in the future the students themselves be required to bear the costs of the nonbasic courses. The resolution failed on a close vote, but it will be back again. If it should become school policy, arts and humanities classes will be available only to those students wealthy enough to pay for them. Economically disadvantaged students will be denied opportunities to develop their artistic talents and thus to discover, with others, their common humanity.

As I became involved in the effort to save arts and humanities classes in the public school curriculum, I became more keenly aware than I have ever been not only that such courses ought to form the core of any respectable public and university curriculum, but also that folklore should be a central component of this curriculum. Those are rather brave words, considering the fact that many of our colleagues in arts and humanities colleges and departments consider folklore, if they consider it at all, to be ancillary to the more traditional and respected dance, music, painting, theater, and literature courses. Brave words or not, they are true; and we folklorists ought to be doing a better job of defending the legitimacy of our discipline and arguing for its primacy in the humanities curriculum. Let's look at that issue more closely.

In a recent issue of *National Forum*, University of California president David P. Gardner gave one of the best definitions of the humanities I have seen:

The humanities are animated by the urge to understand human beings in all their complexity and contradictions. . . . They connect us to our past, linking us to what other human beings have thought and felt and believed and suffered in the process of finding their own humanity.

But the humanities not only connect us to our cultural heritage; they also hold out the potential of connecting everything in our experience. . . . They offer us the experience of wholeness because they touch us at the deepest levels of mind and personality. They are inclusive disciplines, helping us to create larger and more comprehensive meaning out of the fragmentariness of every-day life. In the broadest sense, they are devoted to the task, as one scholar puts it, of "discovering what it means to be human." (1986, 9)

Surely no other discipline is more concerned with linking us to the cultural heritage from the past than is folklore; no other discipline is more concerned with revealing the interrelationships of different cultural expressions than is folklore; and no other discipline is more concerned, or no other discipline should be more concerned, with discovering what it means to be human. It is this attempt to discover the basis of our common humanity, the imperatives of our human existence, that puts folklore study at the very center of humanistic study.

In 1840 Elias Lönnrot, compiler of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, wrote:

If someone were to ask when music and song came into being, we would not go far astray if we were to answer that their origin was not much later than the origin of the entire human species. For the very first people had the same reasons as we have for music and song. ([1840] 1982, ii)

In a somewhat similar vein, Edward Ives wrote recently:

Music is a universal in human culture: so far we have never found people without it. That in itself is a remarkable thing, and I can in no way satisfactorily account for it. I can understand why all peoples have to gather food, construct some sort of shelter, or develop systems of kinship or political and social organization. But why they have to make music is beyond me. Yet make it they do, always. (1985: 74)

Ives's wording is especially interesting. He does not wonder why people make music—he wonders instead why they “have” to make music. The answer, of course, is that making music is one of those imperatives of human existence, one of the things humans have always done, as Lönnrot pointed out, in order to meet similar needs—in order, that is, to be human. What is true of music is equally true of those other “einfache Formen,” or fundamental expressive forms that folklorists study across time and space, in all of their cultural manifestations. The point that many of the “back to basics” people seem never to grasp is that the so-called “nonpractical” arts and humanities courses they would remove from the curriculum are the courses fundamentally important in our development as human beings, the courses that deal with our basic human imperatives.

A few years ago art historian Kenneth Ames put together an exhibit of American folk art at the Winterthur Museum and called the catalog accompanying the exhibit *Beyond Necessity* (1977). This title at first intrigued me, suggesting that art comes into being when people who create utilitarian objects move beyond practical need—beyond necessity—and make the objects beautiful for their own sakes. Thus a woman who spends days stitching an intricate log cabin design into a quilt moves beyond the practical necessity of creating a covering that will keep her warm and creates instead an object that gives her aesthetic pleasure. I have liked this phrase very much and have used it again and again in my folklore classes to explain the development of folk art. But I have recently come to understand that the phrase may be more facile than accurate.

Art, music, literature, and dance come into being not when we move beyond necessity but when we move to a deeper necessity, to the deeper human need to create order, beauty, and meaning out of chaos. It is this human need to combine words, sounds, colors, shapes, and movements into aesthetically satisfying patterns that separates us most clearly from the rest of the animal kingdom and makes us most like God. And it is this need, or the satisfaction of it, that answers Ives's question and explains why all people at all times have had to make music, or paint, or tell stories, or dance. If we ignore this fact, if we neglect the deeper human necessity lying behind the arts and humanities as we determine what is *basic* to a good education, we will do so at the peril

of our society. And if in our preparation of arts and humanities curricula we ignore the contributions folklore study can make to the understanding of fundamental expressive forms, we will do so at the expense of proper humanistic education.

The great contribution of folklore study, of course, is that it crosses most disciplinary lines, tying all expressive forms together, and especially that it examines the artistic and creative efforts of all human beings, not just the elite or the professionally trained. It thus provides us information we can get in few other ways and brings us about as close as possible to achieving that goal set by David Gardner—understanding what it means to be human.

Considering this fact, one would expect university arts and humanities programs to welcome folklorists with open arms. We all know how far that is from the truth. It is easy enough to criticize our colleagues for being unreceptive to folklore and for failing to grasp the contributions folklore can make to our understanding of expressive behavior. Certainly, some of them deserve such criticism; but in many instances the fault lies not so much with them as with ourselves, with approaches we sometimes take to our subject that do little to persuade non-folklorists of its significance. Though there may be many such approaches, I shall focus here on only three: the tendency to treat folklore as handmaiden to other disciplines and thus to undermine its own intrinsic worth, the tendency to be preoccupied with the past at the expense of the present, and the tendency to pay more attention to individual folk groups than to the broader humanity they share.

As I speak about the first of these approaches—the use of folklore in service of other disciplines—I shall focus primarily on folklore and literature, but what I say can be applied to other art forms as well.

I recently read the introduction to Steven Swann Jones's 1984 publication, *Folklore and Literature in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography of Studies of Folklore in American Literature*, and looked through a considerable part of the extensive bibliography. Jones states that one of the purposes of his work is to break down "the assumed differences between folklore and literature," and, by showing how much they share in common, to demonstrate that "they are equally impressive forms of human art" (1984, xxiv). I am fully in accord with Jones's aspiration. But I find little in the bibliography to suggest that scholars have spent much time discovering what folklore and literature share in common. A great number of the studies simply catalogue the folklore in the works of a particular author or show how this lore contributes to the success of a literary work in which it is used. However worthy these goals might be, one frequently leaves such studies with the feeling that the folklore itself is far less significant than the uses to which it is put by individual poets and writers of fiction.

The problem is particularly critical in folklore textbooks, in those works that introduce students and colleagues to our field. In *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1979), for example, which I consider the best of these books, Barre Toelken

comes close to literary exegesis in his chapter on connotation and in some of his interpretations of folklore meaning. But in only two subsections of the book does he explicitly get at the relation of folklore to literature. In the first he points out that in folk artistic works, community taste, as opposed to an individual aesthetic, determines the outcome of artistic creation. And in the second he, once again, shows what folklore contributes to the artistic success of the literary works in which it appears (1979, 199–223, 181–94, 334–43).

What we must have, if we want to win for our subject greater academic credibility, is not more studies of folklore *in* literature, but rather careful analyses of folklore *as* literature. Otherwise, we will continue to be viewed by our literary colleagues as the folks who do the hack work for their more sophisticated and important literary analyses.

Another unfortunate result of focusing on folklore in music, art, or literature instead of on the musical, artistic, or literary merit of the folklore itself is that such a focus contributes to an evolutionary view of folklore still prevalent among our colleagues in other disciplines, and occasionally among ourselves, and, in the process, diminishes the humanistic value of the lore. Many faculty members in arts and humanities colleges and departments view folklore in a condescending way—as unsophisticated, aesthetically inferior material from which the more sophisticated fine arts may have developed or to which writers, composers, painters, and others may occasionally turn for the themes, motifs, and images that they, supposedly, will give fuller artistic elaboration. But they seldom see this material as significant artistic expression having originated from the same human imperatives as the works they study. If they treat folklore at all in their classes, they usually do so historically—that is, they tend to treat it as primitive, subliterate artistic or musical material from which the “higher” art forms eventually evolved. And they view folklore always as subservient to these higher forms. Anyone who doubts this need only walk into almost any arts or humanities department across the country and ask what contribution a folklore course might make to the curriculum. When I suggest to my colleagues that folklore ought to be taught in their departments on an equal footing with other courses—that a course in American folklore, for example, ought to be just as important as a course in American literature—they look at me as though I have taken leave of my senses. We can bemoan this fact all we wish, but until we ourselves begin more seriously to treat folklore *as* music, *as* art, or *as* literature, we are not likely to make much headway with these people and will probably never win a solid place for our discipline in arts and humanities curricula.

Serious literary studies have long been made, of course, of folksongs and folktales; and in recent years scholars have charted new paths to a better understanding of rhetorical strategies in folklore and of the art of folklore performance. But much remains to be done. What we need now are willing workers in the vineyard.

From what I have been saying, it should be fairly obvious that in the studies I envision I would draw no sharp lines of demarcation between folk artistic

expressions and artistic expressions in general. Though some may consider me a heretic, I have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as folk literature—there is simply literature, which I would define as the artistic expression in words of significant human experience. Sometimes that expression is made through the written words of individual authors, sometimes through spoken words in face-to-face encounters among people usually sharing the same social identity. These different modes of transmission and the different audiences to whom the folklore is addressed will, of course, require somewhat different methods of analysis. But that should not obscure the fact that behind each expression lies the human urge, that deeper necessity, to communicate significant experience and emotion and to influence the surrounding social world through the artistic, and therefore powerful, use of language. And neither of these expressions is any less literature, or art, than the other.

As I wrote these words, my thoughts moved back across the years to a young Finnish scholar-patriot, Carl Aksel Gottlund. On October 9, 1815, on a hunting trip near his home in central Finland, Gottlund asked some of the local men accompanying him to sing—they were in a boat rowing across a lake. He described what followed in this way:

I asked them to sing for me to pass the time. Then from the bow of the boat, Torvelainen began to raise his voice against the wind, so that the boat shook. He sang the old forest songs which were formerly sung as men left to hunt bear. The beautiful words and his clear voice, not in a childish but heroic tone, so affected my young mind that I began to cry. . . . Now for the first time I comprehended the beauty and gracefulness of the Finnish language and discerned in my heart an emotion that words cannot explain. (Heikinheimo 1933, 124)

Forty-five years later, in 1860, the Russian scholar P. N. Rybnikov, crossing Lake Onega in northern Russia—not far, actually, from Gottlund’s home country—was forced to take shelter from a storm on a small island. There he heard a *byliny* singer and, much like Gottlund, was moved to tears by the beauty of the performance (Oinas 1964). Surely there was no question in the minds of Gottlund and Rybnikov that what they were hearing was literature, powerfully and artistically performed.

I have not had an experience quite so dramatic as these, but I have on numerous occasions been as moved by witnessing skillful folklore performances as I have by reading the works of *belles lettres* that I teach in my literature courses. A former Mormon missionary, I have for the past fifteen years been collecting, studying, writing about, and especially *enjoying* the folklore of Mormon missionaries. The value of working with a fairly limited corpus of material like this missionary lore—at the moment I have on hand about five thousand narratives—is that one can know it well, just as one can know well the works of a single author. Reading through this material and *remembering* and *envisioning*

the contexts in which it has been performed has for me been closely akin to reading again and again a favorite novel. The lore makes me laugh, makes me angry, and, yes, sometimes moves me to tears. More important, it has the same impact on the missionary narrators and audiences to whose lives it directly relates and from whose experiences it develops.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner argued that it is the privilege of the creative writer

to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail. ([1950] 1960, 1249)

That is equally true on the Shakespearean stage, in one's private encounter with *Moby Dick*, on a rain-swept island in Lake Onega, or among a group of Mormon missionaries coming to terms, through the fictive world they have created in their lore, with pressures that might otherwise be their undoing. To treat these folk performances as anything less than literature would be to demean our field and to detract from its central position in humanistic pursuits.

A second hindrance to the humanistic credibility of folklore is a persisting romantic, or antiquarian, view that recognizes the artistic and humanistic worth of folklore but values the creations of the past much more than those of the present. I don't want to generalize more than I should and must be cautious about what I say, but I believe this view, though it can be found everywhere, is frequently most evident among those whose task is to present folklore to the general public.

During the four years I served on the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Panel, I worried a great deal about some of the ends we were achieving. I remained on the panel, and served one year as its chairman, because the panel, more than any organization in America, struggled to win public recognition of the artistic merit of folklore and because it brought acclaim and feelings of self-worth to countless Americans whose considerable artistic and creative efforts would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

The problem was, or so it seemed to me, that the artistic achievements of numerous Americans still went unrecognized—not because they lacked merit but because they did not fall into the established, and frequently old-timey, categories of American folk art, or under what Jennie Chinn calls “more conservative textbook definitions” (1986). Thus, a woman who saved scrap pieces of fabric and stitched them together into a quilt would have had an easier time winning funding than would an automobile assembly line worker who saved scrap pieces of automobile frames and welded them together into a metal sculpture—at least she would have had the panel not grown so weary of quilting applications.

To be fair, this predilection for the past and the concern for objects generally perceived by the public to be “folk” were not necessarily emphases of the Folk Arts Panel but rather of the people making grant applications, including a number of folk arts coordinators. After all, the panel cannot fund grant applications to highlight contemporary folk art if no such applications are submitted. Grant writers, on the other hand, may have shaped their grant proposals according to what they perceived the NEA would fund. So we have a Catch-22 situation. Whatever the case, instead of applications to support surveying and presenting the salvage art so popular on many western ranches, we would receive applications for funds to present the “safer”—that is, more generally recognized as folk art—saddle-making and rawhide and horsehair braiding. We were frequently asked to support Native American legends but seldom the “war stories” construction workers tell at lunch breaks; Easter egg decoration but not the decoration of recreational vans; wheelwrighting but not lowrider construction. Though there were notable exceptions (and, fortunately, the number is growing), too many applications clearly grew out of romantic, antiquarian notions of folklore and focused primarily on ethnic, rural, and, especially, older art forms. There is certainly nothing wrong with rural, ethnic, or immigrant folklore presentations; indeed, they should and will continue to demand our attention. But in these presentations, the focus should be on contemporary art forms, not just on those surviving from the past or from the old world—many of these will die out no matter how much grant money is poured into attempts to keep them alive.

Reading through these grant applications, I frequently had the desire to send to the writers the words of Elias Lönnrot, one of the most famous of all romantic folklorists. In 1840, in the preface to his *Kanteletar*, a collection of Finnish lyrical folk poems, he wrote:

When customs and life have changed, then one should not be surprised to see earlier singing changed [to fit] the present, for songs depict the times in which they originate. Nothing is quite so laughable as a person who does not value the present [and] looks askance at everything that does not fit the patterns of former times. Every age has its own character, life, and essence, nor can the former time be brought back, no matter how we drag it by the coattails. . . . I say this because of those people who sorrow over the falling of an old tree and do not understand that from a sprout a new tree can rise up if it is not trampled under foot. ([1840] 1982, xxxiii)

In folk arts grant applications I discovered a lot of people sorrowing over fallen trees, tearfully pleading for money lest a wonderful folk tradition disappear forever. I had no quarrel with keeping art forms alive so long as it seemed at all possible to do so. But I was distressed by the naïveté of people who believed

that if the old forms disappeared nothing would ever take their place, no new trees would replace the fallen oaks of the past.

Some may think I am beating a dead horse and will probably argue that folklorists long ago gave up survivalist, antiquarian views of the field and understand perfectly well that folklore is more a key to the present than to the past, and that, as Lönnrot said, it grows out of and reflects the vicissitudes of contemporary living. That may be the theory, but—after reading hundreds of grant applications, reviewing nominations for state folk arts awards and National Heritage awards, and visiting and evaluating numerous folk festivals—I can assure you that it is often *not* the practice. In many instances the agrarian world of yesteryear still occupies center stage.

The difficulty with this past-oriented view is, once again, that it detracts from the humanistic value of folklore. If, as I have argued, painting, sculpting, singing, dancing, and narrating are human imperatives, things we *must* do in order to be human, then it makes little difference what era they come from or precisely what forms they take. What is important is the enduring human spirit coming to terms, through art, with the world that exists at the moment. To ignore the present—to value the people still doing the old things over those doing the new—would be to deny the humanity of our contemporaries.

We must not, of course, ignore the past. Most of us understand that we cannot know where we are until we understand where we have come from, but that does not mean we must forever struggle to keep alive artistic expressions no longer functional. We must be willing to let old forms go, no matter how beautiful, and search out and present (and probably defend) to the public those artistic expressions that have taken their place. We must learn to see in the Hmong story cloth a new form just as viable as the earlier Hmong needlework and fully capable of meeting the needs of Hmong struggling to survive in a new world. And, yes, as Michael Owen Jones has argued, we must even be prepared to recognize in the ways people arrange garbage cans along a street curb the enduring human urge for order and design (1987a, 88–94).

A third impediment to the development of folklore as a humanistic discipline is what I consider an overweening reliance on the concept of folk group, too much emphasis on the particular occupational, regional, ethnic, and religious clusters of people who keep the lore alive. I disagree with the notion that individuals who plan careers in academic or public sector folklore can best prepare for their work by studying the lore of different groups. I find nothing wrong with such study so long as it is comparative and seeks to find common inspiration for apparently different group expressions. I oppose this study if the focus is primarily on the unique characters of the groups studied.

In the introduction to a book on Finnish proverbs, Matti Kuusi wrote: “What kind of people actually are we? What is the Finnish national character?” He continued: “There really is something that separates us from Italians, Americans, Russians, even from the Swedes.” He then explained that he would

use Finnish proverbs to identify the unique Finnish national character and to cast it in sharp relief (1953, v).

In America, especially since midcentury, when Richard M. Dorson began studying the different social groups living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and argued that we had to quit talking about *the* folk and focus instead on different *folks*, that is, on different folk groups ([1952] 1972, 6–7), the emphasis in American folklore study has been not so much on the national character but rather on the character of the different groups that make up our pluralistic society. However, the attempt to discover the uniqueness of the group is closely parallel to the romantic-nationalistic attempt, with all of its inherent dangers, to discover the uniqueness of a particular nation. The brochure advertising the NEA Folk Arts Program states:

The folk and traditional arts have grown through time within the many groups that make up any nation—groups that share the same ethnic heritage, language, occupation, religious or geographic area. The homegrown traditional artistic activities of such groups are sometimes called folk arts, and they serve both to identify and to symbolize the group that originated them. (*Folk Arts 85/86* 1985)

Notice the wording. The lore symbolizes not recurring human features, not those things that link members of the species together, but individual—that is, unique—group characteristics.

Both Kuusi's statement and the statement of the Folk Arts Panel brochure fall squarely in the center of mainline folklore study. In spite of that, I still believe there are better approaches to the study and presentation of our subject matter. Instead of focusing on what makes us different from each other, why not stress that which unites us? I recently returned from a conference in London aimed at discovering the impact on Finnish identity of the numerous celebrations held in 1985 and 1986 in honor of the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Kalevala*. It seemed to me that the conference missed the main point. The great value of the *Kalevala* is that it illuminates not just the Finnish spirit but also the human spirit. Like all good literature, it confronts again and again those enduring human problems with which human beings have always struggled. The great value of folklore is that it does the same thing—that is why folklore is, or should be, primarily a humanistic discipline. When we focus our attention predominantly on what it means to be a Finn or on what it means to be a member of a particular American ethnic, occupational, religious, or regional group, we limit our vision and miss that which is most important in what we study.

I am convinced that we generate and transmit folklore not because we belong to a particular nation or to a particular group—not because we are westerners, loggers, Catholics, or Finns—but because we are human beings dealing with recurring human problems in traditional human ways. The Mormon

missionary who initiates a new arrival in the field by having him save worthless bus-ticket stubs, with the idea that they can later be turned in for a rebate, is not much different from a boy scout who sends a tenderfoot on a snipe hunt or a logger who tests the temper of a greenhorn by cramming his lunch bucket full of grasshoppers. To be sure, folklore usually is expressed in and is given color by the groups to which we belong; it can serve, therefore, as a means of understanding and increasing our sympathy for these groups. But the source of the lore, we should always remember, lies not in our differences, but in our common humanity, in our common human struggle to endure.

Some may wonder how one who has spent much of his career studying a particular folk group—the Mormons—can make the statements I have just made. True, I have studied Mormons and have tried through that study to better understand myself and the culture that has produced me. But my principal interest has really not been Mormons, but people, not a particular ethnographic fact, but the universal truth manifest in that fact. And I am vain enough to believe others should follow the same course. My real view of Mormon folklore study, one that has echoed throughout this article, is expressed in my conclusion to an essay on missionary folklore:

What missionaries share with others is not so much common stories or common practices but rather common reasons for performing them—common means of achieving these ends. From studying the folklore of missionaries, or railroaders, or college professors, we will, to be sure, discover what it means to be a missionary, a railroader, or a college professor. But if we learn to look, we will discover also what it means to be human. (Wilson 1981, 21–22)

I return now to the point with which I began: the humanities should lie at the heart of both public sector and university education, and folklore should lie at the center of the humanities. About 180 years ago the poet William Wordsworth stood on Westminster Bridge, watched the morning sun break over London, and was moved by “all that mighty heart” of the still slumbering city ([1807] 1948, 223). It is all that mighty human heart that is the object of our study as humanists and as folklorists. If in the pursuit of particular theoretical approaches and specialized research interests we ever forget that, then we will have bartered our birthright for a mess of pottage and will have lost the vision that should have brought us into folklore in the first place. We must never fail to recognize and honor all the artistic murmurings of that heart; we must see it as equally important and equally inspiring in all ages, past and present; and we must hear its beating in all places, among all cultures.

In the Nobel Prize acceptance speech I mentioned earlier, William Faulkner said, “I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance” ([1950]

1966, 1249). It is my firm belief that folklore will give us the best picture we can get of our fellow beings struggling to endure. And it is my even stronger conviction that we have a duty to use the knowledge we have gained from folklore study, and the skills we have developed, to help each other prevail.