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## Meaning of Folklore

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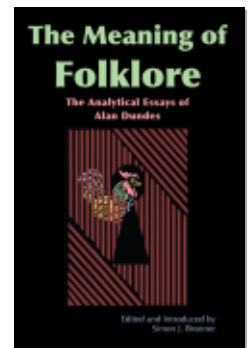
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## THE DEVOLUTIONARY PREMISE IN FOLKLORE THEORY

### Introduction

To encourage the “modern” or American break of folkloristics from its intellectual parent, nineteenth-century European folklore studies, thirty-three-year-old Dundes criticized his elders for holding a deep bias against progress. It was an extension of another historiographical argument in his earlier essay “From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales” (1962g, and chapter 4 in this volume)—namely, that modern structural and contextual theories were refreshingly synchronic, while previous approaches were diachronic, mired in problematic historical-geographic searches for origin. Dundes sought to disrupt the binary underlying prevalent theories in the field—including survival, myth-ritual, and historic-geographic perspectives. He saw this binary as setting a superior elite civilization against a primitivized folk culture. This led to other oppositions, with one pole, assumed to be the later development, dominating or displacing the other, associated with the distant past or “folk”: urban/rural, rhymes/myth, science/spirituality. Dundes wanted to underscore his social definition of folk as any group with a linking factor, and lore as a necessary element of life, past and present. Thus, he declared these as timeless criteria in stating that “there has always been folklore and in all likelihood there will always be folklore.” Instead of viewing change to lore as bad or necessarily degenerative, he argued for a model in which folklore “actually improved or rather evolved in time.” Folklore and its study then stood for something growing—in scope and importance. Only then, he concluded, can folkloristics make progress.

Dundes first presented this paper to professional folklorists at the American Folklore Society meeting in 1967, as part of a special session on the history of folklore scholarship. As with his studies of folklore, in his historiography Dundes sought to uncover structural patterns that revealed driving ideas, often outside the awareness of participants in a culture or discipline. Folklorist Elliott Oring recalled that when he gave the paper, Dundes ignited “a rather animated debate” about whether folklore in reality was indeed vanishing, rather than about whether folklorists unconsciously followed what Dundes called “the vise of devolutionary thought.” Responding to the comment by famed songhunter Alan Lomax, that true folk songs were in danger of extinction, Dundes asserted if Lomax would consider the ever popular but often neglected genre of jokes, he would realize that folklore was growing and emerging. But the obsession with folk songs as a vanishing expression of

a golden age was, Dundes observed, indicative of the devolutionary mindset. As the title of Oring's reminiscence, "The Devolutionary Premise: A Definitional Delusion?" (1975a), suggests, Dundes preferred to turn the debate toward the question of whether there was, as Oring put it, "some unconscious sado-masochistic compulsion of folklorists to devolve the lore that they love." Readers can consider his criticism that Dundes sees a devolutionary bias because he (Dundes) worked with a different definition of folklore from those theorists he analyzed. Oring pointed out, for instance, that jokes were known in the nineteenth century, but they "weren't considered folklore." Therefore, Dundes has a presentist argument, including the criteria used for judging "progress," in discovering devolutionary premises in studies that do not have them. As Oring stated, "to impute a devolutionary premise to survivalist theory is to criticize antiquarians for studying antiques, or to suggest that antiques may be very new rather than very old." That is not to deny devolutionary tendencies in some folklore theories, but, rather, to question whether a binary exists between past and present theories of folklore, or, for that matter, between folklore studies as a practice and other disciplines considered more evolutionary.

Without diving into the debate of whether devolutionary belief as a cognitive pattern is an illusion or not, William A. Wilson has written that Dundes demonized the historic-geographic method as devolutionary, although some of its practitioners did in fact construct "a model in which folklore actually improved or rather evolved in time." Wilson pointed to Julius Krohn, a prominent figure associated with the "Finnish School" of historic-geographic folklore studies, who in the 1880s propounded a view that *Kalevala* poems were not fragmented survivals from a golden age of the past, but, because they had been imbued with a Finnish national spirit through centuries of oral transmission, were constantly re-created and improved (1976). This point of information raised a more general question, sparked by Dundes, about the varied concepts and categorizations of past (e.g., "golden age," "primitive," "ancient," "pre-industrial") and present ("industrial," "urban," "modern," "post-modern"), as well as their interrelationships (e.g., in the idea of folk practices, such as hunting, as an "escape" from modernity as well as an integral part of it; in slang and legend; and indeed in jokes). (See, for instance, De Caro 1976; Bronner 1998; and Bauman and Briggs 2003.) One suggestion that Oring made was to differentiate among the approaches to specific genres, so that Freud's jokes invited evolutionary consideration, while Lomax's ballads impelled devolutionary analysis.

Writing in the twenty-first century, Dundes doubted that folklorists had been able to undo devolutionary thinking. In a jeremiad-sounding address to the American Folklore Society, he cited references, after he published his "Devolutionary Premise" essay (1975c), to folkloristics as "predicated on a vanishing subject" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996) and to "the disappearance of its subject matter" (Ben-Amos 1972). His answer, one applauded by many folklorists, was that "folklore continues to be alive and well in the modern world, due in part to increased transmission via e-mail and the Internet." Adapting the famous epigrammatic phrase attributed to Mark Twain (a charter member of the American Folklore Society), Dundes quipped, "Reports of folkloristics' death have been greatly exaggerated" (2005c).

Annotations of two terms in this essay may be helpful to readers. "Ur-form" (also referred to as *Grundform* in German) refers to the original or archetypal form from which many variants emerged. Two of the scholars mentioned by Dundes are usually credited with spreading its use: Antti Aarne (1867–1925) from Finland, who developed the tale-type index, a standard international reference for folktales; and Walter Anderson

(1885–1962), who taught in Germany (born in Belarus and raised in Estonia). The use of Ur has a biblical reference to the Book of Genesis; it was the birthplace of the first patriarch Abraham (translated as “father of a multitude” or “leader of many”). Ur exemplifies the “many from one” philosophy in a holy scripture. The metaphor is meant to show the multiple trajectories of narrative offspring, since Abraham is viewed as the patriarch for Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and, even within those, for a number of variations, such as the twelve tribes of Israel.

*Gesunkenes Kulturgut* is a German phrase, literally meaning sunken cultural materials. It was coined as a folkloristic term in 1902 by German folklorist and philologist Hans Naumann (1886–1951). He used it to describe the process by which expressions originating in the upper stratum of society “sink” to, or are adapted by, the lower stratum. It assumed a rigid class structure, arranged hierarchically by wealth and occupation, since it suggested interchange between an aristocracy and peasantry at the top and bottom, respectively. As the reference work *General Ethnological Concepts* by Åke Hultkrantz outlined, and Dundes averred, the concept is much older. Hultkrantz gave examples from the mid-nineteenth century, and claimed that among European scholars, it “has been widely accepted” (1960). Still, Hultkrantz recognized alternative theories of transmission; one suggested a reverse vertical direction from the bottom to the top, but nonetheless maintained the binary of simple folk and sophisticated aristocracy to which Dundes objected. Several ethnologists cited by Hultkrantz viewed culture as both an up and down flow, while others, such as Berkeley anthropologist George Foster (1914–2006) suggested a “circular relationship” in which folk culture “draws on and is continually replenished by contact with the products of intellectual and scientific social strata, but in which folk culture continually, though perhaps in a lesser degree, contributes to these non-folk societies” (1953). In one of Dundes’s last publications, he was still complaining of the prevalence of *gesunkenes Kulturgut* theory in historical scholarship. Taking up the proverbs represented in the famous painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* by Pieter Bruegel, he found that the devolutionary thinking evident in *gesunkenes Kulturgut* had been prominent in preventing credit being given to the cultural creativity of ignorant, illiterate peasants in the painting. Rather than relying on “educated aristocratic individuals,” Dundes proclaimed, Bruegel “favored folk material rather than elitist classical or biblical versions” of proverbs. Other examples he gave were that Polyphemus (AT 1137) began with Homer’s *Odyssey*, and that the “Taming of the Shrew” (AT 901) originated with Shakespeare’s play, although it was clear to Dundes that both authors borrowed the plots from oral tradition. “The point is,” Dundes concluded, that “it is folklore which is the source of high culture, not the other way around” (2004b, 18).

## The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory

THERE HAS BEEN FAR TOO little progress observed in the development of folkloristics. But this lack of “progress” is not so surprising in view of the unmistakable and consistent bias against progress inherent in the majority of folklore theories. Even a cursory examination of the intellectual history of folklore scholarship reveals a definite unquestioned basic premise that the golden age of folklore occurred in the past, in most cases specifically the far distant past. As a result of the past-oriented Weltanschauung of most folklorists—and it is really with the worldview of folklorists that this essay is concerned—it has always appeared to be logically necessary and highly desirable to engage in historically reconstructing the golden age of folklore. The endless quest for the land of “ur” as in “ur-form,” or “archetype” in Finnish Method parlance, continues unabated in conservative folkloristic circles. Inasmuch as the means and direction of folklore methodology are probably inescapably controlled by the nature of the theoretical premises, hitherto largely unexamined, held by professional folklorists, it is absolutely essential that these crucial underlying premises be held up to the light of reason if there is ever to be any appreciably significant change in methods of folklore analysis.

The bias against “progress” in folklore theory may be easily demonstrated by briefly considering some of the numerous examples of degeneration, decay, or devolution—the particular term is not the issue—which abound in so much of traditional folklore theory. Perhaps the most obvious instances are those underlying the various folklore transmission theories. Typically, surveys of such theories begin with a detailed consideration of degeneration, perhaps signaling its hallowed position.<sup>1</sup> The most common devolutionary notion is that folklore decays through time. Another notion is that folklore “runs down” by moving from “higher” to “lower” strata of society. These two notions are by no means mutually exclusive and in fact one can without difficulty imagine that if folklore really moved from “higher” to “lower” strata, it could easily undergo textual deterioration at the same time. Classic examples of these notions include Max Müller’s “disease of language” according to which theory of semantic devolution the original names of Vedic and other gods became confused or forgotten as time passed, as well as Hans Naumann’s “*gesunkenes Kulturgut*”<sup>2</sup> which held that cultural items originating in the upper stratum of society filtered down to the lower stratum which was wrongly thought to be synonymous with the “folk.” A logical consequence of this “aristocratic” origin of folklore theory was that folklore consisted largely of reworked remnants which had managed somehow to survive the presumed downward transmission of culture.

It should be remarked that the *gesunkenes Kulturgut* notion is still very much with us. Folklorist Walter Anderson believed that folktales usually moved from “culturally higher” to “culturally lower” peoples, according to Stith Thompson,<sup>3</sup> who echoes the idea, pointing out that American Indians have borrowed European tale types whereas Europeans have not borrowed American Indian tales. Thompson even goes so far as to say that “If the principle is really valid we may ask whether tales must keep running down hill culturally until they are found only in the lower ranges,” although he concedes this would be an overstatement of Anderson’s position. Nevertheless, Thompson’s own devolutionary bias may well

have led him to misinterpret the available data regarding a hypothetical archetype for the "Star Husband" tale which he studied using the Finnish method. Like all devolutionary folklorists, he assumes that the original form of the tale must have been the fullest and most complete version. Later, shorter versions are thus assumed to be fragments. The devolutionist normally postulates a movement from complex to simple whereas an evolutionist might argue that the development from simple to complex is equally likely. In any case, Thompson is forced to label some of the shorter versions of Star Husband as confused or fragmentary despite the fact that his "fragmentary" versions demonstrate a common uniform pattern.<sup>4</sup>

There are many other striking illustrations of the devolutionary premise in folklore transmission theories. The Grimms argued that folktales were the detritus of myths<sup>5</sup> and just as folktales were assumed to be broken down myths, so it was held that ballads were the detritus of epics or romances.<sup>6</sup> But perhaps no more overt statement of the premise can be found than in the conception of "*zersingen*" in folksong theory. "*Zersingen*" refers to the "alterations of a *destructive* nature"<sup>7</sup> which occur as songs are sung. The very act of singing a folksong is thus construed to be a potentially destructive act endangering the continued stability of the song sung.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, just as singing songs is presumed to destroy them, so the telling of folktales is thought to run the risk of ruining them. Retelling a tale allows the forgetfulness of the raconteur to become a factor.<sup>9</sup> This is implicit in Walter Anderson's famous superorganic "law of self-correction" (*Gesetz der Selbstberichtigung*).<sup>10</sup> Anderson's idea was that folktale stability was not attributable to the remarkable memories of raconteurs, but was rather the result of an individual's hearing a given tale on many different occasions, perhaps from many different sources. Narratives essentially corrected themselves, argued Anderson, but the very term used indicates the devolutionary bias. Why is it assumed that folktales need to be *corrected*? Only the unquestioned assumption that folktales become "incorrect" through time can possibly justify the notion that folktales need to "correct themselves"—granting for the sake of argument that tales rather than people do the "correcting."

A critical correlative of the devolutionary premise is the assumption that the oldest, original version of an item of folklore was the best, fullest, or most complete one. A change of any kind automatically moved the item from perfection toward imperfection. Partly for this reason, one finds a deep resentment of change and an equally deep-seated resistance to the study of change in folklore. A similar situation prevailed until relatively recently in anthropology where even up to the first several decades of the twentieth century pioneer ethnographers sought to obtain "pure" precontact cultural data. Students of the American Indian, for example, would often write up their field data as if the Indians had never been exposed to or affected by acculturative European influences. Mooney, in collecting Cherokee tales, specifically commented that he did not bother to record what were obviously European borrowings. This made perfect sense in the light of a past-oriented Weltanschauung. If the forms of the past were more valuable, then it logically followed that changes of any kind were by definition potentially destructive in nature. Although anthropologists have learned to accept and study culture change, folklorists generally have tended to continue to look askance at change.

The Hungarian folklorist Ortutay, in probably the most detailed critique of folklore transmission theories, notes that, "Retelling nearly always involves a change" and although there may be an element of creativity involved in making any change, "in its later, final stages . . . oral transmission comes to be equivalent to deterioration, to a process of stuttering forgetfulness."<sup>11</sup> The same attitude towards change is expressed by Stith Thompson when in summarizing Walter Anderson's views he says, "The first time a change of detail

is made in a story it is *undoubtedly* a *mistake*, an *error* of memory.”<sup>12</sup> Deleterious changes could be caused by weakness of memory, unwelcome interpolations, or from contaminations of themes. Note the obvious pejorative connotation of the term “*contaminated text*,” a term which once again reflects the ever present devolutionary premise.<sup>13</sup>

The generally negative attitude towards change has been clearly reflected in folklore methodology. Just as ethnographers carefully sifted through unavoidable details obviously only recently added through acculturative contact in an attempt to discover the pure unadulterated original native culture, so practitioners of the Finnish historic-geographic method sought to work backwards through the unfortunate changes (or, in Thompson’s terms, the mistakes and errors) in order to find the pure unadulterated original ur-form. The difficulties of searching for the ur-form, too often presumed to be hopelessly hidden by the destructive, deteriorative effects of oral transmission were considerable, but not always insurmountable. Possibly one of the most ambitious and optimistic efforts was made by students of the Bible engaged in Form Criticism.

Form Criticism, according to Redlich,<sup>14</sup> is a method of study and investigation which deals with the preliterary stage of the Gospel tradition, when the material was handed down orally. It was assumed that Biblical materials before being set down in written tradition “were subject to the usual inevitable fate of oral tradition, such as adaptation, alteration, and addition.” However, it was also assumed that there were definite, discernible laws governing the oral transmission process, laws which once discovered might be applied (in reverse) to the written Gospels. By thus working backwards, Form Critics hoped to be able to reconstruct “the narratives as they actually happened and the sayings as they were actually uttered by our Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

A few folklorists have commented upon the consequences of the devolutionary premise. Von Sydow, for instance, challenged the hypothesis that the original form of a folktale was necessarily the most complete, most logical version,<sup>16</sup> although he confessed this had been his own view when he began his folktale research. Similarly, Gerould in *The Ballad of Tradition* deplores the “unfortunate tendency on the part of scholars to take it for granted that earlier ballads are likely to be better than later ones. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Yet Gerould argues that the process of deterioration is inevitable: “Degeneration of noble themes and captivating tunes must have gone on ever since ballads became current. . . .”<sup>18</sup> The implicit nature of the devolutionary premise is also revealed in the wording of Gerould’s consideration of the American “Old Bangum” versions of “Sir Lionel” (Child #18) when he observes, “The interesting point about all these versions, it seems to me, is the evidence they give that changes and even abbreviations do not necessarily imply any structural degeneracy.”<sup>19</sup> More recently, Ortutay has suggested that short elementary forms such as proverbs or jests are “most capable of resisting the corroding effect of degressive processes.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite a few critical comments by folklorists, there does not appear to be much awareness of the enormous impact of devolutionary ideas upon folklore theory and methodology. At best, folklorists seem to accept the idea that the universe of folklore is running down. Even Olrik’s so-called epic laws of folklore were presumed to weaken in time. Olrik suggested, for example, that the law of the number three “gradually succumbs to intellectual demands for greater realism.”<sup>21</sup> One possible reason for the lack of awareness may be that folklore has often been associated with evolution rather than devolution. And the interesting question does arise, how folklorists could remain so utterly committed to a devolutionary worldview at a time when ideas of evolution and of progress were so much at the fore of European intellectual thought.



The intellectual history of the idea of progress is reasonably well documented<sup>22</sup> and there can be no doubt that this idea came into prominence at about the same time that the discipline of folklore began to emerge. Progress meant more than that the “moderns” were just as good as the “ancients” as had been argued in the late seventeenth century. Progress meant that the golden age was not behind us but ahead of us.<sup>23</sup> The positivistic ethic of the ultimate perfectibility of man and society had considerable influence upon the course of most academic disciplines. However, as we shall see, the effect of the evolutionary idea of progress on the treatment of folklore materials was largely a negative rather than a positive one.

To be sure, there were some attempts to borrow evolutionary ideas in folklore theory. One of the most striking instances is Hartland’s suggestion that narratives all over the world followed a basic evolutionary general law.<sup>24</sup> Folktales, and specifically incidents in tales, changed with different stages of civilization in accordance with this law. Speaking of an incident in the Forbidden Chamber cycle of tales, Hartland observed, “The incident in this shape is specially characteristic of savage life. As with advancing civilization the reasoning which has moulded it thus becomes obsolete we may expect that the incident itself will undergo change into a form more appropriate to the higher stages of culture. . . .”<sup>25</sup> An item of folklore had to become fit in order to survive. Hartland spoke of the popular mind and how it “rendered by a process analogous with that of natural selection, which we may call traditional selection, the version that has reached us predominantly over all others.”<sup>26</sup> Hartland even suggested that it was traditional selection which tended to “eliminate the ruder and coarser, preserving and refining, not necessarily the more credible, but the more artistic.” The idea that traditional selection operated in such a way as to ensure esthetically superior products was of course entirely in keeping with the concept of evolution as progress.

In spite of this isolated example of a positive application of evolutionary “progress” oriented theory to folklore—and there are several others—it is quite evident that the concept of progress per se had a devastatingly negative effect upon folklore theory. The association of folklore with the past, glorious or not, continued. Progress meant leaving the past behind. From this perspective, the noble savage and the equally noble peasant—folkloristically speaking—were destined to lose their folklore as they marched ineluctably towards civilization. Thus it was not a matter of the evolution *of* folklore; it was more a matter of the evolution *out of* folklore. This may best be seen in the work of Tylor who in adamantly opposing rigid degenerative theories definitely championed unilinear cultural evolution. At the same time, he forcefully argued the *devolution* of folklore. There was no inconsistency in this. On the one hand, Tylor states that “notwithstanding the continual interference of degeneration, the main tendency of culture from primaeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization.”<sup>27</sup> On the other, Tylor conceived folklore, that is, “survivals,” to be “transformed, shifted or *mutilated*” fragments of culture.<sup>28</sup> To put it succinctly, as humans evolved, so folklore devolved. Tylor’s view of folklore is clear. For example, he suggested that it might be possible to trace the origins of games of chance from ancient divination rituals insofar as such games were “survivals from a branch of savage philosophy, once of high rank though now fallen into merited decay.”<sup>29</sup> In an unequivocal statement, Tylor remarks, “The history of survival in cases like those of the folk-lore and occult arts which we have been considering, has for the most part been a history of dwindling and decay. As men’s minds change in progressing culture, old customs and opinions fade gradually . . .” although Tylor does admit that there are in fact occasional exceptions to this “law.”<sup>30</sup> If survivals or folklore were truly dying or dead, then it made a good



deal of sense for Tylor to argue that the folklorist's or ethnographer's course should be like that of the anatomist who carried on his studies if possible on dead rather than on living subjects.<sup>31</sup> Here we have the ultimate logical consequence of devolution: death. And this is why devolutionary-minded folklorists have devoted themselves by definition to dead materials. The view, still widely held, is that as all the peoples of the world achieve civilized status, there will be less and less folklore left until one day it will disappear altogether. Thus Ruth Benedict could write authoritatively in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* in 1931 that "in a strict sense folklore is a dead trait in the modern world."<sup>32</sup> Are folklorists doomed to study only the disappearing, the dying, and the dead?

Of course, the gloomy reports of the death of folklore are in part a result of the misguided and narrow concept of the folk as the illiterate in a literate society, that is, the folk as peasant, as *vulgus in populo*, as isolated rural community.<sup>33</sup> Since the majority of folklorists in Europe and Asia continue to restrict the concept of folk in this way, citing as a matter of fact the definitions of folk society offered by American anthropologists Redfield and Foster for authority,<sup>34</sup> it is easy for them to believe that gradually the folk are dying out. With the devolutionary demise of folk or peasant culture, the deterioration of folklore was a matter of course. Ortutay puts it in these terms: "We suggest that, as long as the oral tradition of the peasantry continued to exist as a uniform system . . . degressive and deteriorative processes played a secondary role in the dialectics of oral transmission."<sup>35</sup> Since unquestionably one of the reasons for the break-up of peasant culture is the advent of industrialization, Communist folklorist Ortutay is able to point the accusing finger of blame at capitalism for destroying peasant (= folk) culture and consequently for destroying folklore.<sup>36</sup> Of course, if folklorists were able to free themselves from so narrow and obsolescent a concept of folk, they could see that there are still numerous active functioning folk groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, occupational, etc.) and that the peasant community is just one of many different types of "folk." In fact, even as this one type of formerly rural homogeneous folk group becomes transformed into urban, heterogeneous, part-time folk groups, new types of folklore are emerging, some of which are actually caused by capitalism as in the creation of folklore from commercial advertisements.<sup>37</sup>

Yet even attempts to repudiate the idea that folklore is dying cannot fully escape the traditional devolutionary bias. Richard Dorson ends his book *American Folklore* with the statement that "The idea that folklore is dying out is itself a kind of folklore."<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, Dorson is indicating that this idea is a traditional one, but, in addition, since he obviously doesn't believe that folklore is dying out, the second use of the term folklore has a hint of the idea of folklore as falsehood or fallacy. In any event, the meaning of "folklore" in the phrase "That's folklore" in popular parlance refers to an error. This continued pejorative connotation of the word folklore<sup>39</sup> has a close connection with the devolutionary premise.

If folklore is conceived to be synonymous with ignorance, then it follows that it is a good thing for folklore to be eradicated. With this reasoning, educators and social reformers seek to stamp out superstitions encouraging folk medical practices on the grounds that such practices are either harmful in and of themselves or harmful to the extent that they delay or discourage consultation with practitioners of scientific medicine. In this light, it is not just that folklore is dying out, but rather it is a good thing that folklore is dying out. Moreover since it is regrettable that folklore isn't dying out at an even faster pace, the implication is that people should give the devolutionary process a helping hand.

The education versus folklore (or to put it in other terms: truth versus error) dichotomy is intimately related to the devolutionary premise. In essence, the idea is that the more

education, especially the more literacy, the less the illiteracy and thus the less the number of folk and the less the folklore. It is wrongly assumed that literate people have no folklore.

This is really the evolutionary progress idea restated. As nonliterate and illiterate people become literate, they will tend to lose their folklore. Typical is Gerould's remark: "Not until the spread of primary education and the conversion of the general public from oral to visual habits, which took place in the nineteenth century, was folk-song marked for destruction."<sup>40</sup> Much sounder, of course, is Albert Lord's position: "While the presence of writing in a society *can* have an effect on oral tradition, it does not *necessarily* have an effect at all."<sup>41</sup> It is certainly doubtful whether increased literacy and education have seriously affected the quality and quantity of folk speech or jokes, at least in American culture. Moreover, if there is any validity to what has been termed the concept of "postliterate man" (as opposed to preliterate or nonliterate man), referring to the idea that the information communicated by such mass media as radio, television, and movies depends upon the oral-aural circuit rather than upon writing or print, then it becomes even more obvious that oral tradition in so-called civilized societies has not been snuffed out by literacy.

The difference between a future oriented worldview involving progressive evolution out of folklore and a past oriented worldview reveling romantically in the glorious folkloristic materials of nationalistic patrimonies seems to be clear cut. However, it is important to realize that not everyone shares the future oriented evolutionistic postulate. There are a number of devolutionary based philosophies of life, philosophies which decry the inroads made by civilization. In such philosophies of cultural primitivism<sup>42</sup> the golden age remains safely embedded in the past while the evils of civilization do their deadly work, destroying all that is deemed good and worthwhile. From this perspective, folklore and civilization are still antithetical—just as they were in Tylorian times, but the critical difference is that folklore is good and civilization is bad, rather than the other way around. The distinction can also be expressed in terms of utility. The nineteenth century doctrine of progress included a bias towards utilitarianism. Evolution and progress meant an increase of useful cultural items. In this light, folklore as a vestigial remain or relic was defined as essentially useless.<sup>43</sup> With the substitution of devolution for evolution in general worldview, there comes the possibility of transvaluing folklore into something *useful* rather than *useless*. An example of this may be found in some of the psychological approaches to folklore.

Freud summarized the devolutionary philosophy of life in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the title itself indicates the bias—when he stated that "our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions."<sup>44</sup> Note also that the Freudian method consisted of clarifying or removing *present* neuroses by treating them as survivals from a fuller, more complete event in the individual's *past*. The historical reconstruction of the traumatic ur-form to explain apparently irrational and fragmentary phenomena is cut from the same methodological cloth as the majority of folklore reconstruction techniques. More revealing perhaps for folkloristics are the actual approaches to folklore found in the anthroposophical tradition of Rudolf Steiner and his followers as well as in the applications of analytical psychology by Carl Jung and his followers. For both Steiner and Jung, folklore represented an important vehicle by means of which individuals could travel backwards through time to gain vital spiritual benefit. In other words, one of the ways of getting back to nature, ideal human nature that is, and away from forward marching destructive civilization, was by regaining contact with folklore. Rudolf Steiner's influential lecture "The Interpretation of Fairy Tales," given on December 26, 1908, in Berlin,

clearly illustrates the devolutionary nature of civilization as opposed to folklore. Fairy tales, according to Steiner, belong to time immemorial when people still had clairvoyant powers and when they had access to spiritual reality. In modern times, people have wrongly engaged in intellectual pursuits and have gotten out of touch with spiritual reality. Fortunately, by reading and understanding (anthroposophically, of course) fairy tales, moderns can attempt to rediscover their long lost spiritual heritage. In like fashion with only slightly less mystical language does Jung argue that myths and their archetypes “hark back to a prehistoric world with its own spiritual preconceptions.”<sup>45</sup> Like Steiner, Jung assumes that the primeval spiritual reality is fundamentally a Christian one, and, like Steiner, he is unalterably opposed to intellectual and rational attempts to explain the content of myth. Perhaps the overt Christian cast of Steiner and Jung’s approach to folklore accounts for the placement of the golden age in the past. Fallen from grace and tainted by civilization, people need to find balm for their injured souls by immersing themselves in myths and tales which are presumed to offer the possibility of at least partial spiritual salvation. In this view, it is not folklore but the spiritual person which is running the risk of dying out. It is curious how little notice the Steiner and Jung positions have obtained from folklorists, for in truth they are pioneers in the uncharted area of applied folklore. Folklore in their conceptual framework provides a unique source of therapy for the troubled if not sick mind of the modern person.

Having delineated the nature of the devolutionary premise, one can see the history of folklore scholarship in a new light. It would appear that each successive methodological innovation has consisted largely of a slightly different application of devolutionary theory. If it is accurate to say that Max Müller’s solar mythology yielded to Andrew Lang and company’s “anthropological folklore” approach, then one can see that the crucial notion of the “disease of language” was replaced by a notion that fully formed “rational” savage ideas devolved through time to become fragmentary, irrational mental survivals in civilization. Moreover, one might consider that one offshoot of the survival theory was the more specific myth-ritual approach in which games, folkdances, and popular rhymes were presumed to be degenerate derivatives of original myths or even earlier rituals. One thinks, for example, of Lewis Spence’s contention that folk rhymes including some nursery rhymes are frequently survivals of myth and ritual, “that is, they represent in a *broken-down* or *corrupted* form, the spoken or verbal description of rite.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, if it is accurate to say that the late nineteenth century unilinear cultural evolutionary based doctrine of survivals in turn lost its sway in folklore circles to make way for the Finnish version of the older comparative method, then one can similarly see that the degeneration oriented concept of mutilated, vestigial survivals has been succeeded by a technique whereby multitudinous versions of an item of folklore—versions which are said to suffer from the alleged ravages of performance—are amassed with the hope of reconstructing the perfect, albeit hypothetical, basic form from which these numerous partial realizations must have sprung. The question is thus not whether there is a devolutionary bias or premise in folklore theory and method. There can be no doubt that there is. The question is merely which devolutionary scheme is in vogue at any given point in time.<sup>47</sup>

In evaluating the significance of identifying a devolutionary premise in folklore theory, there are several possibilities. One of these is that folklore is in fact devolving and that the various expressions of the devolutionary premise simply attest to this. Another possibility, however, is that the devolutionary premise is a culture bound product of a larger nineteenth century European worldview, a worldview which favored romanticism and primitivism,

and which encouraged scholars in many disciplines to look and work backwards, that is, toward the presumed perfect past. If this were the case, then it might be useful to suggest alternative a priori premises so that modern folklorists might be enabled to escape the vise of devolutionary thought. One could, for example, propose a cyclic scheme<sup>48</sup> in which it was assumed that folklore materials could rise phoenix-wise after a period of degeneration. Or one could construct a model in which folklore actually improved or rather evolved in time. Why must we assume, for example, that jokes told in any one age are necessarily inferior in any way to those told in ages past? Is it not within the realm of human possibility that a new version of an old joke might be a finer example of oral style and humor than its precursors? There should be recognition of the fact that change per se is not necessarily negative. Change is neutral; it is neither good nor bad. It may be either; it may be both. In this light, the unity, as Ortuay referred to it, of "one creation—innumerable variants"<sup>49</sup> need not depend upon the idea that the initial one creation is perfect and the innumerable variants which follow merely imperfect derivatives. The whole idea of one creation giving rise to multiple variants is very likely a manifestation of what the intellectual historian Lovejoy described under the framework of the great chain of being, a dominant intellectual concept in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe.<sup>50</sup> The many deriving from the one may certainly be conceived as belonging not to a set in which perfection is necessarily assumed to be logically prior to imperfection, but rather to a set in which members may be ranked genealogically or hierarchically (e.g., in esthetic terms) or even as existential equals.

With a more eclectic theoretical framework, one might say that folklore in general is NOT devolving or dying out, but only that *some* genres or *some* examples of *some* genres are decreasing in popularity or usage, e.g., the true riddle or ballad in American urban society. By the same token, one might say that folklore in general is NOT evolving or being born, but only that *some* genres or *some* examples of *some* genres are increasing in popularity or usage and that occasionally new folklore forms are created. One need not, in other words, place the golden age either in the far distant past or in the far distant future. One may merely indicate that folklore is a universal: there has always been folklore and in all likelihood there will always be folklore. As long as humans interact and in the course of so doing employ traditional forms of communication, folklorists will continue to have golden opportunities to study folklore.

## Notes

1. Gyula Ortuay, "Principles of Oral Transmission in Folk Culture," *Acta Ethnographica*, VIII(1959), 175–221, provides such a survey. See especially pp. 200–207. See also Douglas J. McMillan, "A Survey of Theories Concerning the Oral Transmission of the Traditional Ballad," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XXVIII (1964), 299–309.
2. For a convenient summary of Naumann's theory, see Adolf Bach, *Deutsche Volkskunde* (Heidelberg, 1960), pp. 64–69, 435–440; or Åke Hultkrantz, *General Ethnological Concepts* (= *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore*, Vol. I) (Copenhagen, 1950), pp. 158–159.
3. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York, 1951), p. 438.
4. For some critical details which suggest that a devolutionary premise can bias hypotheses in historic-geographic studies, see Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), pp. 449–450, n. 9.
5. Thompson, op. cit., p. 370.
6. Cf. Ortuay, op. cit., p. 202; D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1959), p. 43.

7. The definition is from Laurits Bødker, *Folk Literature (Germanic)* (= *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore*, Vol. II) (Copenhagen, 1965), p. 330. The emphasis is added.
8. For extended discussions of “zersingen,” see Renata Dessauer, *Das Zersingen. Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie des deutschen Völkliedes* (= *Germanische Studien*, No. 61) (Berlin, 1928); Hermann Goja, “Das Zersingen der Volkslieder. Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie der Volksdichtung,” *Imago*, VI (1920), 132–242, an abridged form of which appeared in translation as “The Alteration of Folksongs by Frequent Singing: A Contribution to the Psychology of Folk Poetry,” *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society*, ed. Sidney Axelrad and Warner Muensterberger (New York, 1964), III, 111–170. “Zersingen” and related phenomena are also discussed by Bach, op. cit., pp. 509–510. Note that if folklorists truly believed in the reality of “zersingen,” they might well exert an all out effort to prevent any further performances of folklore inasmuch as they have assumed that deterioration is an inevitable concomitant or result of performance. One can just imagine folklorists running around begging the folk not to sing folksongs, kindly explaining to them that singing them in time destroys them. This is perhaps analogous to librarians who are so concerned about injuries to and losses of books that they would almost prefer to keep all books safely locked up, away from all potential readers. The difference, of course, is that folklorists could not possibly stop the folk from using folklore—even if they wanted to. Nevertheless, in a way a modified version of “zersingen” philosophy does appear to prevail among those folklorists who express great anxiety about quickly collecting folklore before it disappears, dies out, or suffers further “loss” of meaning.
9. Kaarle Krohn, *Die Folkloristische Arbeitsmethode* (= *Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning*, Series B, No. 5) (Oslo, 1926), pp. 59–65; Thompson, op. cit., p. 436.
10. Cf. Dieter Glade, “Zum Anderson’schen Gesetz der Selbstberichtigung,” *Fabula*, VIII (1966), 224–236.
11. Ortutay, op. cit., p. 180.
12. Thompson, op. cit., p. 437. The emphasis is added.
13. Cf. Krohn, op. cit., pp. 84–85; Thompson, op. cit., p. 437; Ortutay, op. cit., p. 203; and Bach, op. cit., p. 519.
14. E. Basil Redlich, *Form Criticism: Its Value and Limitations* (London, 1939), p. 9.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
16. Dundes, op. cit., p. 233.
17. Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (New York, 1957), p. 214.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 174. The emphasis is added.
20. Ortutay, op. cit., p. 207.
21. Dundes, op. cit., p. 134.
22. Some of the standard sources include John Baillie, *The Belief in Progress* (London, 1950); J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (New York, 1955); Morris Ginsberg, *The Idea of Progress: A Revaluation* (London, 1963); and Charles van Doren, *The Idea of Progress* (New York, 1967).
23. Harry Elmer Barnes, *An Intellectual and Cultural History of the Western World*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York, 1965), II, p. 840.
24. Edwin Sidney Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales* (London, 1890), p. 350.
25. Edwin Sidney Hartland, “The Forbidden Chamber,” *Folk-Lore Journal*, III (1885), p. 239. For a similar borrowing from evolutionary theory in folksong, see D. K. Wilgus, op. cit., p. 61.
26. Edwin Sidney Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus* (London, 1896), III, p. 156.
27. Edward B. Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (= *Primitive Culture*, Part I) (New York, 1958), p. 21.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 17. The emphasis is added.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 158.



32. See Alan Dundes, "The American Concept of Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, III (1966), p. 235.
33. For a useful survey of the various conceptualizations of "folk," see Hultkrantz, op. cit., pp. 26–129.
34. The point is that there is really no connection between the restricted "folk" of *folk* society in which "folk" is used simply as a synonym for peasant and the "folk" of *folklore*. A folk or peasant society is but one example of a "folk" in the folkloristic sense. Any group of people sharing a common linking factor, e.g., an *urban* group such as a labor union, can and does have folklore. "Folk" is a flexible concept which can refer to a nation as in American folklore or to a single family. The critical issue in defining "folk" is: what groups in fact have traditions?
35. Orttuy, op. cit., p. 201.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 206.
37. Alan Dundes, "Advertising and Folklore," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, XIX (1963), pp. 143–151.
38. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago, 1959), p. 278.
39. The negative connotation of "folklore" is by no means limited to the English-speaking world. See, for example, the final comments in Elisée Legros' valuable *Sur les noms et les tendances du folklore* (= *Collection d'études publiée par le Musée de la vie wallonne*, No.1) (Liege, 1962), p. 47.
40. Gerould, op. cit., p. 244.
41. Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York, 1965), pp. 134–135.
42. For an extended discussion of this concept, see Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), p. 7. Also relevant are: Lois Whitney, "English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins," *Modern Philology*, XXI (1924), pp. 337–378; and John D. Scheffler, "The Idea of Decline in Literature and the Fine Arts in Eighteenth-Century England," *Modern Philology*, XXXIV (1936), pp. 155–78.
43. One of the best treatments of "survivals" is Margaret T. Hodgen, *The Doctrine of Survivals: A Chapter in the History of Scientific Method in the Study of Man* (London, 1936). See also Fred W. Voget, "Progress, Science, History and Evolution in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Anthropology," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, III (1967), pp. 132–155.
44. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated from the German by Joan Riviere (Garden City, 1958), p. 29.
45. Carl G. Jung and Carl Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (New York, 1963), p. 72. Judging from Carlos C. Drake's survey, "Jung and His Critics," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXX (1967), pp. 321–333, there appears to have been little notice taken of Jung's pro-Christian and antirational approach to myth. Jung claims that Christ exemplifies the archetype of the self and that in general pure intellectual insight as opposed to "experience" is not enough, although he admits that he cannot pass on *his* experience to his public. See *Psyche & Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (Garden City, 1958), pp. 32–36. In any case, when Jung speaks of the "de-Christianization of our world" and "the Luciferian development of science and technology" (p. 35), it is an expression of devolutionary worldview. For Steiner's approach to folklore, see his *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (New York, 1929), or any of the works cited in Alan Dundes' review of Julius E. Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Fairy Tales*, in *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXVIII (1965), pp. 370–371.
46. Lewis Spence, *Myth and Ritual in Dance, Game, and Rhyme* (London, 1947), p. 2. The emphasis is added.
47. Once the devolutionary premise has been pointed out, it is easy to find examples of it. For example, there is André Varagnac's "Les causes de la décadence du folklore dans les pays industriels," in *IV International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research in Athens: Lectures and Reports*, ed. Georgios A. Megas (Athens, 1965), pp. 600–605.
48. Some of the various cyclic schemes are summarized in Lovejoy and Boas, op. cit., pp. 1–7; see also van Doren, op. cit., pp. 117–121, 159–193.
49. Orttuy, op. cit., p. 182.
50. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).