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VERBAL ART[1]

By William R. Bascom

SOME five years ago I suggested that, according to anthropological usage, folklore can be defined as verbal art; this was not an independent invention, but grew out of a series of discussions with Richard A. Waterman while we were writing a joint article.[2] Although neither of us can now clearly recall who first suggested it, verbal art was proposed as a term to distinguish folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, and other "literary forms" from the other materials which are commonly considered as folklore, but which anthropologists classify under other categories. Neither of us, apparently, expressed clearly enough that verbal art was proposed only as a definition of what anthropologists customarily refer to as folklore. At least our definitions were vigorously attacked by Samuel P. Bayard as inconsonant with traditional usage.[3] I can only accept my own responsibility for failing to state specifically that verbal art was never intended as a definition of the field which folklore now encompasses. On the contrary, it was suggested as a convenient and appropriate term for folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other "literary forms." It was meant to encompass only a segment of folklore and a segment of culture, and not the whole of either.

I agree with Bayard that it is unfortunate that anthropologists have tried to preempt the word folklore to designate a portion of the total body of culture. I am willing to go even farther and say that anthropologists were somewhat presumptuous in twisting the meaning of folklore to fit in with their own needs in classifying the aspects of culture. As I have previously emphasized, the word folklore in English is nearly twenty years older than the word culture, and it was twenty-five years after Thoms had described folklore that Tylor defined culture in much the same terms.[4] Moreover, folklore corresponds to its original sense of folk knowledge or folk learning most closely as it is used outside of anthropological circles. We are even more presumptuous if we refer to verbal art as "folklore proper," or if we suggest that folklorists as a whole should accept the anthropological definition of folklore, when the responsibility for these terminological difficulties seems to lie clearly with anthropology. It was with this responsibility in mind that the term verbal art was suggested, in the hope that anthropologists would accept it in the place of folklore, and that the way would be opened for a clarification of our mutual field of interest.

I am grateful to Bayard for his thoughtful, considered, and constructive comments, which were written before the El Paso meetings, where I extended an invita-

[1] Delivered at the Sixty-sixth Annual Meeting of The American Folklore Society, New York City, 29 December 1953.

[2] *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend,* ed. M. Leach (New York, 1949), I, 398. Waterman's definition is in the same volume, p. 403.

[3] S. P. Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," *JAF,* LXVI (1953), 3, 12-13.

[4] W. R. Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," *JAF,* LXVI (1953), 284-285.

tion for a paper of this nature. However, I disagree with his position that the reference to folklore as related to literature or art is without warrant or precedent. It was, as a matter of fact, because of a dissatisfaction with the neologisms for folklore which were already current that verbal art was first suggested. All of these neologisms refer either to literature or art, and it would seem that about the only possibilities that have not been suggested are pre-literate literature, non-literate literature, and unwritten writings. The fact that they have come in large part, but by no means exclusively, from anthropologists suggests that both anthropologists and other folklorists have felt the need for a term to distinguish folktales, myths, proverbs, riddles, and related forms of verbal art from customs, beliefs, rituals, and other materials of folklore.[5] Whether verbal art constitutes the central core of folklore interest and research as Herskovits suggested,[6] or whether it does not as Bayard maintains,[7] may be a matter of opinion, but there can be no doubt that there is a need for an acceptable term to distinguish it from the total range of materials which are classed as folklore.

The terms "unwritten literature," "popular literature," "folk literature," "primitive literature," and "oral literature" emphasize the relations of these forms to literature, but all are premised upon the irreconcilable contradiction that literature is based upon letters and writing, whereas folklore is not. Unwritten literature at least states this contradiction in unmistakable opposition. Popular literature suggests a parallel to popular music as opposed to classical music, whereas the parallel is more accurately to unwritten music. Folk literature, which has folklore itself as a precedent, seems the least objectionable of these paradoxical terms, but there is still a considerable disagreement about the meaning of the term "folk," which has not been resolved by the considerable body of recent literature deriving from Redfield's use of the term. Oral literature, unfortunately, has associations with dental hygiene on the one hand and with Freudianism on the other. Oral art has these same connotations, but at least avoids the inconsistency of "unwritten literature."

The concept of verbal art avoids all of these difficulties, and has the further advantage of emphasizing the essential features which distinguish the folktale, myth, proverb, and related forms. It places them squarely alongside the graphic and plastic arts, music and the dance, and literature, as forms of aesthetic expression, while at the same time emphasizing that they differ from the other arts in that their medium of expression is the spoken word. From this point one can go on to examine the relation of verbal art to the other art forms, drawing helpful parallels and determining what special features it has which grow out of this medium. Strictly, verbal means "expressed in words, whether spoken or written, but commonly in spoken words; hence, by confusion, spoken; oral; not written; as, a verbal contract."[8] Although verbal art could be defined as including literature, whose medium is the written word, it seems justifiable to follow common usage and restrict its meaning to forms which depend upon the spoken word, because of the need for an acceptable term for these.[9]

[5] I wholeheartedly agree that the beliefs Bayard cites are not art, literature, or verbal art, but that they are folklore. Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," p. 13.

[6] M. J. Herskovits, "Folklore after a Hundred Years: A Problem in Redefinition," *JAF,* LIX (1946), 100.

[7] Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," p. 3.

[8] *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 5th ed. (Springfield, Mass., 1940), p. 1112.

[9] Thomas A. Sebeok suggested after the address that "spoken art," which follows the usage of linguists in distinguishing spoken languages from written languages, would leave "verbal art" free to include both spoken art and literature.

There is, to be sure, as little agreement on the definition of art as there is on the scope of folklore, but this problem need not concern us here. Rephrasing the concept of art as "elaboration beyond the point of utility," let me instead suggest my own minimal definition of art as concern with "form for its own sake."[10] The implications of this definition can be brought out by using as an example the wooden stool. A roughhewn block of wood of adequate size and appropriate height, which does not involve any aesthetic considerations, may serve as a seat. If its top has been smoothed or shaped to make it more comfortable, or if the block has been carved out to make it lighter, easier to handle, and thus more portable, this can still be explained in terms of utilitarian purposes. But one cannot so explain the choice, whether conscious or traditional, between carving a stool with a single or double pedestal, in such a fashion as to create a three-legged,[11] four-legged, or multi-legged stool, or so that there is a circular or rectangular support for its outer rim. Here, obviously, there is a consideration of "form for its own sake" which cannot be adequately explained in utilitarian terms, but which involves questions of tradition, style, and aesthetics. When geometric or naturalistic decoration is involved, these questions become even more obvious.

In verbal art it is only necessary to compare myths, folktales, proverbs, and riddles with the direct statements of ordinary speech to see a similar concern with the form of expression, over and above the needs of communication. Among these distinctive features may be the form of statement, the choice of vocabulary and idiom, the use of obsolete words, the imagery of metaphor or simile, the set number of repetitions, the formalized openings and closings, the incorporation of cultural details, conventionalized greetings, or directional orientations, and other stylistic features which are absent in ordinary conversation.[12]

In order to clarify the issues involved, I am willing to accept as an example of verbal art the incantation which Bayard has chosen as one "which is neither art nor literature in any definable sense of those terms."[13] I am willing to suggest that Tom Sawyer's "Doodle-bug, doodle-bug, tell me what I want to know" achieves at least an approximation of balance through the repeated invocation, and that this repetition is unnecessary, and would not be employed in normal direct address. Although I am unwilling to rest the case for the concept of verbal art on this example alone, it seems to illustrate a concern for "form for its own sake." Verbal art differs from normal speech in the same way that music differs from noise, that dancing differs from walking, or that an African stool differs from a block of wood.

The medium of expression in the verbal arts is the spoken word, rather than material substances as in the graphic and plastic arts, tones and rhythms as in music, or movements and gesture as in the dance. In the same way that in the graphic and plastic arts the artist is subject to the limitations of his medium and the techniques by which he manipulates it, the phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar of the language

[10] This is only a minimal, non-evaluative definition. It is not suggested that every variant of a folktale that has been recorded is equally aesthetic, nor that all individuals are equally skilled as narrators. The degree of success of an individual variant or tale must be measured in terms of the extent to which it achieves the stylistic and aesthetic standards of the culture of the narrator.

[11] It could be maintained that a three-legged stool is better suited to uneven ground, but this form is actually uncommon in non-literate societies.

[12] See, for example, G. Herzog, *Jabo Proverbs from Liberia* (London, 1936), pp. 3-15; and R. Benedict, *Zuni Mythology,* Columbia Univ. Contributions to Anthropology, XXI (New York, 1935), I, xxx-xxxii.

[13] Bayard, "The Materials of Folklore," p. 4.

in which it is expressed impose limitations on verbal art, and on literature as well. Picturesqueness of speech is often a simpler matter of local vocabulary or idiom which involves no more of an aesthetic choice on the part of the narrator than does the weaver's adaptation of curves to the straight lines of the loom, or than the musician's adaptation of a melodic line to the flute or any other instrument with fixed notes. The creative element on the part of the artist involves what the narrator, weaver, or musician is able to achieve within these fixed limits.

In the graphic and plastic arts there is a basic difference in that, being expressed in material substances, they assume a somewhat permanent form when they have been created, and can be collected and exhibited in museums, and measured, studied, analyzed, and photographed long after the artist who created them has died. In this the graphic and plastic arts resemble literature and written music, whereas verbal art resembles unwritten music and the dance, which depend upon repeated performances for their continued existence. Although a folktale may survive for centuries in recognizable form, it does not have an independent existence outside the minds of those who know it, and it cannot survive without being repeatedly retold. Whether it is an original or an oft-told tale, after it has been told nothing remains except in memories.

Literature, like sculpture or painting, has an independent, semi-permanent, static existence. Verbal art, on the other hand, is intangible and dynamic. Even where the narrator is expected to repeat a tale as nearly verbatim as he can, there is still the possibility of considerable change over the period of centuries. The amount of change that occurs probably depends upon the complexity of the form, and assuming an equal emphasis on exact repetition, one would at least expect more change in long, involved narratives than in proverbs. Moreover, where the narrator is expected to introduce original variations in characters and characterizations, incidents and their sequence, descriptive details, or novel twists to familiar plots, a tale may vary markedly even from one telling by the same narrator to another. In such cases, each telling of a tale must be regarded as a unique event, and in approaching the problem of creativity it is important to distinguish between 1. the variations on a familiar theme introduced by the individual narrator, and 2. the origin of the theme, or the tale type, itself.[14] It is worth noting, also, that whereas in the translation of literary works a deliberate attempt is usually made to adhere as faithfully as possible to the original text, when a folktale spreads verbally by diffusion it may be markedly modified and reinterpreted in the process of adaptation to a new cultural setting.

Verbal art differs from literature not only in its method of transmission, but also in its method of creation. Whereas the materials of folklore originate without writing, through improvisation, literature is composed "with pen in hand." This means not only that it is possible to edit and even drastically to revise and rework a manuscript before it is published, but also that for the writer the audience is largely imaginary, and may even be irrelevant. The composition and the reading of a novel or of a poem are independent acts. From the point of view of the audience, the writer's creative labors are of as little interest as the actual stages in carving a mask or painting a picture. While the period of creation involves an aesthetic experience for the artist himself, the primary objective is usually the aesthetic experience of his audience, when the finished work is seen or read and when the artist himself may not even be present.

In the case of verbal art, however, the aesthetic experience of the audience is

[14] Cf. Bascom, "Folklore and Anthropology," pp. 286-287.

simultaneous with the creative act, and the same is true of unwritten music and the dance, unless private rehearsals are held. In the telling of a tale a narrator may correct himself when he has misspoken and wishes to change a word or a phrase, but major revisions occur only in subsequent retellings. The narrator, moreover, is in face to face contact with his audience, and may modify the development of his tale in accordance with its expression of approval and interest, either as he goes along or when he retells it later. Where the narrator is permitted a degree of freedom and originality, the audience reaction may become an important factor in the creative process in verbal art.

Verbal art is composed and transmitted verbally, while literature is composed in writing and transmitted in writing. Yet it is obvious that these two traditions have not followed independent courses, but have intermingled and influenced one another. One result has been tales, proverbs, or other forms of verbal art which have been reworked and adapted to literary standards of style and propriety, and are thereafter transmitted by writing or printing. This would include not only the utilization of the materials of folklore in the writings of Mark Twain and others, but also the use of folktales from other lands for children in our own society. For the lack of a better term, these may be referred to as literary adaptations.

Secondly, there are instances where materials from written or printed sources have been incorporated into the verbal tradition, and in the course of time have been reworked and modified in accordance with its standards. These we may call folklorizations. The Biblical story of Genesis in Stoney and Shelby's *Black Genesis*,[15] for example, has been completely adapted to the stylistic standards of Gullah folklore. The fact that this story probably had its ultimate origin in a verbal tradition, was written down, and many centuries later was incorporated into the verbal tradition of another people, only serves to illustrate how intermingled the streams of verbal art and literature may be. The whole field of folklorized materials, however, deserves much more attention than it has received. I feel that it could prove as profitable to the understanding of the problem of style in verbal art as the study of literary adaptations has proved in the field of literary criticism.

Two other categories are also possible. First, there are literary compositions which are patterned after the standards of folklore, as was the case with some of the Paul Bunyan stories. Like the literary adaptations, these fall within the broad category which includes literature, and may be referred to as pseudo-folklore. I would employ Dorson's apt term, "fake-lore," only when they are misrepresented as having origins in legitimate folklore. Finally, the reverse process is possible, although undoubtedly it has occurred less frequently than folklorization, where a narrator has adapted a traditional tale or invented a new tale which is told and retold according to literary standards of style, rather than those current in the verbal art of his own group.

Once again there are close parallels in the other arts, and some comparisons with music may clarify these points. The equivalent of literature is music which is composed in written form; this has an independent existence and can be played without the composer being present. However, aside from the few individuals who enjoy music simply by "reading" a score, music depends basically upon being played or sung, i.e., upon being performed, even if it is composed and transmitted in written form. This fact makes revisions in subsequent performances possible, and brings it

[15] S. G. Stoney and G. M. Shelby, *Black Genesis* (New York, 1930), pp. 3-35.

closer to the drama than it is to the novel, although a play may be read as well as performed. For certain forms of written music, the emphasis is on note for note accuracy, as in classical music generally, while in popular music and especially jazz, improvisation is expected, even on written scores. Because of the importance of the performance in music, there is no assurance that written music will be less dynamic than unwritten music.

The equivalent of verbal art is music which is created by improvisation with the composer in direct face to face relations with his audience, and which is transmitted only by repeated performances. Even with traditional, unwritten music, the extent to which the performer is permitted to vary the melody and rhythm of a piece differs from society to society, from period to period, and from one type of music to another. The rigid standards of repetition that are demanded in certain forms of religious music, even in non-literate societies, contrast strikingly with the improvisation that is permitted or even expected in some secular music. Similarly in verbal art, the narrator of a folktale may be permitted a considerable degree of freedom while, in the same society, the effect of a proverb may be lost if it is misquoted, and the efficacy of a curse or incantation may be destroyed if it is not recited correctly.

In the case of music, the distinction between written and unwritten forms has been complicated by the invention of the phonograph, the tape and wire recorder, the radio, and the sound track of movie films. These mass media have become means for transmission of both written and unwritten music, and in some parts of the world, at least, they are far more important than written or printed scores. It is only in recent years that we have seen the equivalent of this with regard to the materials of verbal art, with the production of records on which folktales are narrated. These may still be dismissed as unimportant for verbal art, but this is not the case for music. Here materials which are transmitted by various means of sound recording seem to constitute a third class which cannot be equated with literature, yet which in terms of the mode of transmission seem closer to literature than to folklore, unless they have been incorporated into the verbal tradition. "You Are My Sunshine" became a hit tune in the islands of the Pacific and spread independently of the records and the radio by means of which it was introduced. Rumbas and other Afro-Cuban music have become very popular in West Africa, where the leader of a dance band calling for the next number may refer to it as "H.M.V. 62." Here Afro-Cuban music is being "folklorized," and is undergoing a process of readaptation to the African musical styles from which it is in part derived.

A closer analogy to the folklorization of literary materials would be "Way Down Upon the Suwanee River," which has in some areas become a part of the verbal tradition of America, although spread by its written form. There are numerous musical equivalents of literary adaptations, with themes from folk music incorporated into both classical and popular music. The equivalent of pseudo-folklore would be the composition in writing of a blues song, or of a song in the musical idiom of the Calypso. The reverse of this would be an improvisation in the idiom of written music in a situation where this creation continued to be performed, but remained unwritten.

These categories by no means exhaust the varied results of the intermingling of the streams of verbal art and literature, but it is hoped that they may provide useful concepts for the discussion of the relations between verbal art and literature. They

may also prove helpful in the sometimes perplexing question of what happens when the folklorist records a tale or proverb, after which it also has an independent existence on paper or sound recording, and no longer exists in memory only, but can be played or, like literature, read. But however many times a folktale has been recorded, and however many copies of it may have been published, or however many times it has been read, it still lives as folklore in any community where it is still transmitted verbally. The same is true in the case of music, or the dance, which have been recorded in movies, sound recordings, or by written notation, but which do not depend upon these for transmission.

Here again a comparison with another art form may provide clarification. Although a stool or a mask has an independent existence and a certain degree of permanence, the art itself dies when these forms cease to be produced. The rock paintings of the South African Bushmen and the cave paintings of the Magdalenian period in Europe represent arts which are dead, despite the fact that the paintings themselves survive, and are even being adapted for contemporary American fabrics. Verbal art, similarly, dies when people stop telling it, and when they learn it by reading, rather than by hearing it told by others.

The aesthetic experience of both the artist and his audience is recognized as one of the distinctive functions of sculpture, painting, music, the dance, and literature. This is equally true in verbal art, although it has been customary to speak of this function as amusement. Certain forms of verbal art are employed as pastimes, but the aesthetic experience itself encompasses a variety of emotional responses, in verbal as in the other arts. A bogey-man story may inspire fear; a folktale, humor; or a myth, awe; whereas a proverb may be employed to produce a wide range of subtle distinctions in emotional reactions. It is no more satisfactory to equate verbal art with amusement than it is to equate art with beauty. Not all that is art is beautiful, and not all that is beautiful is art. Similarly not all that is verbal art is amusing, and not all that is amusing is verbal art.

Although the aesthetic experience is not the only function of the arts, let us never, as folklorists, lose sight of this distinctive feature of the forms of verbal arts in which all of us, whether humanists or social scientists, have a mutual interest, and to which in large part our Society owes its stable, if tenuous, unity and long existence. This elementary emotional response, which is able to transcend the barriers of language and translation, has provided the personal justification for much of the time and effort which have been devoted to the collection and analysis of the various forms of verbal art.

Yet I have often wondered how far we are willing to sacrifice this warm aesthetic experience on the cold altar of science and scholarship? Are we not denying to ourselves in print the pleasure that we enjoy in research? In so doing have we not restricted our membership to a small group of academicians, when our materials have a wide popular appeal? Is it basically inimical to high standards of research to publish, for their own merits alone, occasional folktales, myths, proverbs, or riddles? Are we not continually disappointing those who have enjoyed these, and turn to the JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE for more? Are we not thus alienating potential members of our Society? So long as we refuse to do so, can we legitimately criticize the popularizer of folklore? Let me, in concluding, recommend to our incoming

President, to our Editor, and to our other officers, that consideration be given to a short special feature in our JOURNAL devoted to superlative examples of verbal art which are chosen primarily on their aesthetic merits and their authenticity. With the wealth of published and unpublished materials that we have to draw on, this could become one of the JOURNAL's star attractions, providing an opportunity for all of us to enjoy verbal art for its own sake.

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