

## **Oblique Performance: Snapshots of Oral Tradition in Action**

**Robert Cochran**

Consider three moments, widely separated in space, time, cultural setting. The first occurs in the northwest corner of Arkansas in the 1930s. A young woman kindles a small fire behind her family's farmhouse, kneels beside it, and burns the letters of a departed lover. The second takes place a half-century later, in 1989, in Timisoara, a provincial town in southern Romania. Captured on a bit of newsreel film, a man in a bulky coat leans from a curb and spits upon an X-crossed portrait photograph pinned by the wiper to the windshield of a slow-moving car. The bespattered face is the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, just deposed and summarily executed. The third moment returns to Arkansas, goes back to 1983. It's a retirement party arranged by his subordinates for a supervisor of custodians at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. It's a surprise, unveiled when the crew breaks for dinner. A "gag" gift comes first, a silly hat with an obscene motto. Next is a cake, decorated with a straightforward message of respect and good wishes. Coeds in swimsuits then carry in the "real" gift, wrapped (another "gag") in a series of nested boxes. It's a watch, engraved with another farewell message.

For all their differences, the three scenes hold one central feature in common: each has at its center actions inspired and shaped by oral traditions. Such traditions, that is, are operating, being put to use, despite the fact that the actors in each instance are "performers" only in the most inclusive sense. The first scene is an essentially private act—the young woman is performing primarily for herself. The spitter is surely observed by others—perhaps he even knows his gesture is being recorded—but he too is his own primary audience, his action a form of invective, a curse hurled at a man who is not there. Even the retirement party is hardly a full-scale public event. The gathered janitors constitute a sort of occupational family, and their little celebration is essentially a domestic festival. The claim here is that close examination of these scenes (and others of like miniscule scale)

leads to enhanced appreciation of the multiform workings and subtle powers of oral traditions.

In the first instance the traditional genre in play is folksong. The repertoire of the young woman's family includes a song they called "Dear Charlie," though published collections most often have it as "Charlie [or Charley] Brooks."<sup>1</sup> The song's speaker is a young woman, recently jilted by mail. Charlie's letter reports his new love (usually for a Miss Gray), returns his old love's letters and evidently seeks the return of a ring, a photograph, and his own billets-doux. "Dear Charlie" is the young woman's proud, wounded, finally obliging reply. "Here is your picture, dear Charlie," opens one verse, adding that the photo's faded condition is a result of frequent kissing. "Here is your ring, dear Charlie," introduces another, which goes on to ask that Miss Gray receive a new band or at least be told the old one's prior history. But earlier than these verses is the second (in most versions), which deals with the letters: "Here are your letters, dear Charlie / I burned mine as they came. / And I hope without reading them over / You'll submit them at once to the flame."

In cold print "Dear Charlie" comes across as a hackneyed piece, thoroughly predictable both in its contents and in its overwrought expression. But this very conventionality is a point very much in its favor, given a young woman new to what seems to her a comparable situation. Alma Gilbert, in the summer of 1925, in Zion, Arkansas, has in fact just provoked a rupture with a boyfriend. Her future husband, Alex Allen, is a new boy in town, he and his brother Burl have access to the family's "model T Ford touring car," and current beau John is suddenly, awkwardly, placed squarely in the middle of the road to the future. "I had seen John with another girl," Alma wrote fifty years later, "and he had seen me in the car with [her sister] Thelma, Burl, and Alex; that was enough to start on. John sent word to me by a mutual friend to return his gifts—a bracelet, several strings of beads, and his letters." Alma's narrative does not specify what she did with the beads and the bracelet, but it does account for the letters: "But it hurt my pride," she continues, "to be asked to return his letters, so I burned them, one at a time, under the wash kettle" (Allen 1978:3)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The region's major collection, Vance Randolph's *Ozark Folksongs*, has it as "Charley Brooks" (1980:vol. 4:210-13), and it is #5, "Charlie Brooks," in Dianne Dugaw's collection (1983). Early recordings include Vernon Dalhart's "Nellie Dare and Charlie Brooks" (Victor 20058) and the Carter Family's "Charlie and Nellie" (Decca 5702).

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of "Dear Charlie" and Alma Allen's memoir is adapted from Cochran 1999:52-53.

The young woman arranging her life in northwest Arkansas burns her boyfriend's letters instead of her own, and her more or less deliberate act of sabotage bears only a limited comparison with the situation in "Dear Charlie." But a basic consonance seems nonetheless clear. Her family's folksong repertoire provided a dramatic and appealing model for the last acts of a courtship gone bad. No doubt there were other models, other guides to actions and attitudes appropriate to a young woman living through such a moment and required to act the part. But the song's image possessed vivid appeal. The image in the mind's eye of love letters curling in flame, once-cherished pages flaring and then turning black and cold—these must have seemed powerful tokens of finality and irreversibility. Burning the letters was a dramatic and flamboyant gesture, suitable and fitting. Soon the young woman was in the back yard, on her knees before her little fire, adding the letters "one at a time" to the flames. Confronted by novel experience, called upon to act an unfamiliar role, perhaps sensing the spotlight of family and community attention upon her, she found guidance in the songs of her family tradition.

My point here is that despite the prominent role of oral tradition in this episode, the young woman at its center remains an unlikely candidate for study. She was never a prominent singer or collector of folksongs; her "performance" of "Dear Charlie" was far more oblique. My recognition of the song's role in her actions required only the juxtaposition of a written "ballet book" collection with a personal memoir. (Simple but not necessarily easy—I had to hang around long enough to first learn of the memoir's existence and then earn its loaning, and before that I had to believe that such hanging around is a legitimate, even requisite, component of ethnographic work. The basic operating credo can be simply put: studying a family's music tradition, I dismissed *no* offered information, no anecdote, no diary or newspaper story or letter. I accepted anything and everything any family member found worthy of communicating. I even read a family cookbook. That's why a relatively small book took me a decade to research and write. The reward: I saw oral tradition in action, watched "Dear Charlie" actually get used. There were maybe a dozen no less vivid instances. I still think of it as ten years well spent.)

In the second instance the traditional genre involved is a joke. I heard it in Romania in 1986, although my article containing it did not appear until 1989, just months before I saw the newsreel film from Timisoara. The joke's star is Romania's megalomaniac dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, here anticipating his death and preoccupied with the subsequent wellbeing of his children. He decides to leave the presidency and the Peles Castle in Sinaia to his eldest son, while a daughter gets the interior ministry and the priceless

rugs and jewels stolen from Brasov's famous Black Church. Finally he's given away everything, all the offices and all the treasures, but his youngest child is still unprovided for. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I have nothing left but my portrait. You always were my most resourceful child, so I hope you'll manage without the help I've been able to give the others." "Thank you, father," says the son. "Your portrait is more precious to me than any castle or Swiss bank account."

Then Ceausescu dies, but soon begins to worry, especially over the fate of the disenfranchised child. Finally he decides to return, just to see how the young Ceausescus are getting along. What he finds is shocking. All the children he left with palaces and jewels and powerful positions have fallen to the gutter—they're drunks and prostitutes and beggars, every last one. "My youngest son must certainly be dead," he thinks. But to his surprise he finds the last son is flourishing—he owns a fine, richly furnished home and a luxurious automobile. Ceausescu is flabbergasted. "How did you manage it?" he asks. "The others had money, houses, offices, and they're in terrible shape."

"Easy," replies the last son. "I took the portrait you gave me and printed thousands of copies—every leu I could get I spent on copies of your portrait. I put them aside. Then, on the day you died, I took one of them down to the Piata Unirii and spread it out on the sidewalk. Then I stood there and shouted, 'Spit—ten lei. Piss—100 lei.' Every day I went out with another portrait. I still do, whenever I need money" (Cochran 1989:268).

When I first published my study of Romanian jokes, I'd been too pessimistic in assessing their political potential. I'd closed the piece on a somber note, stressing that the efficacy of the jokes was psychological, not political, as if the two could be neatly separated. "Generically, the joke is Janus-faced," I wrote. "At once assertion of defiance and admission of defeat, it disparages itself even in its telling, proclaims its own limits, is always at least partly told on the teller. A private independence is maintained, but no public change is effected." I then ended with what I called the saddest joke of all, one featuring a Russian dog, a Polish dog, and a Romanian dog meeting to plan a New Year's celebration. "We could have the party at my place," suggests the Russian dog. "I've got some meat, but we can't bark." The Polish dog then offers his home. "There isn't any meat," he says, "but it's OK to bark." Meanwhile the Romanian dog looks more and more puzzled. Finally he speaks. "What's meat?" he asks. "What's barking?" (Cochran 1989:272).

I realized my mistake, of course, three years after I'd first heard the joke and perhaps three months after my study was published, when I saw the television newsreel footage from Ceausescu's violent overthrow, the oblique

performance of the old joke about Ceausescu's youngest son making his fortune with his portrait. "It's the joke!" I thought, the instant I saw the man with the bulky coat lean from the curb. "It's off the page and into the street!" The joke was more powerful than I'd realized, its use by Romanians more subtle and more resilient than I'd suspected. Back in 1986, when I'd first heard it, with Ceausescu wielding dictatorial power and seemingly immune to the popular discontent he so effectively throttled, the joke kept alive the sheer possibility of a nearly paradisaical world where desire could be freely enacted, where one could spit on the despised portrait without fear. The joke, in the dark world of Ceausescu's Romania, held out, however covertly, a utopian vision. I'd loved it, certainly, and admired the wit and courage of its tellers. I wrote the article in homage to them. But I'd underestimated it (and them) nonetheless—this was clear, finally, as I sat safe at home and watched the jokers take to the streets. Once again, at great remove from the obvious venues where it is customarily studied, oral tradition was very much in play. The jokers weren't at the moment telling jokes, any more than the Ozark schoolgirl burning letters was singing a folksong; she was breaking off a romance and they were overthrowing a dictator. But both were "performing" their oral traditions, their song and their joke, in vital and original ways.

Once again, however, the central actors on the Romanian street are unlikely candidates for the attention of students of oral tradition. Just like the Ozark girl who isn't singing a folksong but *using* her knowledge of the song to organize her behavior in a novel situation, the Romanian celebrators are *using* their familiarity with the joke to organize their response to a no less unprecedented occurrence. (I'm aware, of course, that my description of the men on the Timisoara street is finally speculative; it's quite possible they had no knowledge of the joke, just as it's possible that Alma Allen never thought of "Dear Charlie" when she decided to burn John's letters. I think that's unlikely—I never repeated the joke to a Romanian who had not heard it—but it is certainly possible. The joke, after all, surely reflected a widely shared desire—that's why it was so popular. The joke and the song fit nicely in Romanian and Ozark culture—they're deeply conventional productions, easily utilized, consciously and unconsciously, by Romanians and Ozarkers.)

Recognition of this second oblique usage of oral tradition, like the first, required only a simple juxtaposition—where appreciation of the Ozark scene required knowledge of the song and acquaintance with the memoir, the Romanian celebration required knowledge of the joke and the watching of a television newscast. Once again, the would-be deep student of an oral traditional genre is rewarded for sheer breadth and duration of attention, for

merely hanging around and for (as before, with the Ozark family) dismissing no information offered by (or in this instance about) Romanians.

In the third and final instance the traditional genre involved is a party. Here the connection with anything commonly understood as oral tradition is less obvious. For the first two situations there were at least more or less standard traditional texts (a folksong and a joke) discernible behind the actions, serving (I've argued here) as motivating templates. But these are almost entirely lacking for the retirement party. Here the "texts" (plural because the party is both a multifaceted and a composite achievement, the work of six men directed to the honoring of a seventh) have no stable verbal form. The party itself was a complex event—though it started as a straightforward plan to "get him something." The final version, developed over a period of several weeks, featured a "big one" straight gift with an engraved message, a "gag" gift with its own jocular (obscene) message, a decorated cake with yet another message, a "gag" wrapping of the straight gift in a series of nested boxes, presentation of this gift by three "bathing beauties" (coeds in swimsuits), an appearance by the honoree's own supervisor, and a series of snapshots providing a record of the occasion.

From the beginning I was most intrigued by the *shape* of the party—I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, but I'm now convinced that the competence shared among the party's designers is usefully comprehended as an instance of oral tradition. Each planner knew, for example, without reference to etiquette books or professional party consultants, that "everybody" gave watches to people when they retired. (I asked all six about this practice, one at a time, in terms verging upon sarcasm: "Why hand him a watch, when the whole point of retiring is you don't need to worry about what time it is any more?" Again and again I got the same answer, in terms verging upon incredulity—"everybody" did it. Surely I knew that.)

I did. And I also soon came to recognize this shared certitude as an instance of oral tradition in operation, no matter the absence of a specific codifying text. And of course this doesn't stop with the watch. The party's every feature is traditional—the hat, the cake, the bathing beauties, the straightforward tributes and compliments on the watch and cake, the obscene motto on the hat, the comic wrapping of the watch in nested boxes, even the commemorative photographs. The party in all its variety was assembled by the combination in temporal sequence of disparate elements contributed out of one man or another's idea of appropriate festivity. In a striking instance of communal recreation, each element suggested by one survived by not violating the notions of retirement party decorum held by five others.

Not just the party's constituent elements but also their combination into temporal sequence was a matter of tradition. The party opened with a

joke: the man they would honor they would first mock. Standard procedure, after all: one who would rule must first seek office, kiss babies, press flesh, suffer fools. Rituals of reversal, with the highly placed on their knees, scrubbing the feet of the lowly—such tableaux are familiar to students of culture. Here jocularly would make intimacy possible. The custodians were a group of southern working-class males, after all, and direct statement of affection and respect was a matter for careful handling. Indeed, the carefully prepared ceremony opened with its own repudiation. We wanted to get you a nice gift, the retiree's co-workers said, but all we could afford was this cheap cap with its obscene, contradictory message.<sup>3</sup> Before the "real" gift, with its straightforward message of compliment, could be bestowed, its givers must bring in their "gag gift" and "throw it at him first." In his willingness to be the butt of their joke, their retiring supervisor demonstrated once again his worthiness of their honor, of the great pains they had taken to salute him.

This requisite balance, of comic surface and deeply felt core, was maintained throughout—as the cake was preceded by the silly hat, so the watch was wrapped in a toilet paper box and presented by the girls in bathing suits. It's all a big joke, the men said, as they handed him their heart. Just a good laugh, they said, but under the surface was a matter of sufficient importance to sustain several weeks of planning and preparation.

As best I could determine from my interviews, the party's designers shared a great tolerance for the ideas of their co-workers—I heard of no suggested element that was rejected as inappropriate by the group. The "retirement party," then, developed additively from the originating notion of a group gift. (Actually, the Romanian scene may share something of this composite character. It's difficult, for example, to know just where the limits of the joke's influence lie. The most obvious candidate for a conscious enactor of the joke's desires is the spitting man, of course, but what of the man at the wheel of the car, and—if a different person—the producer/copier of the X-ed out photo? It seems not extravagant, once the retirement party and the Romanian street scene are juxtaposed, to understand both as contrasted forms of festivity, structured by several creators. On the one hand we have a voluntary retirement, eased by colleagues bent upon the shared expression of respect; on the other an involuntary removal, celebrated by citizens bent upon the shared expression of hatred and contempt.)

---

<sup>3</sup> The message on the cap was in fact cryptic. "HMFIC," it said, in capital letters, "Head Motherfucker In Charge," with "RETIRED" written below. My original discussion of this party appeared as "Rite of Passage: Retirement Party" (McNeil and Clements 1992:214-25).

But the point here, as before with the Ozark schoolgirl and the Romanian celebrators, is that the custodians are at first glance unlikely candidates for the attention of students of oral tradition. In fact they're the least likely candidates of all—at least the Ozark girl knows a song and the Romanians know a joke. The traditions deployed by the custodians are uncodified, even implicit, apparent only in the shape of the party they created. Appreciation of their accomplishment, too, is more than in the other instances a matter of fortuitous juxtaposition. No explicit credo of sustained and wide-ranging attention can be articulated by way of explanation—in fact, appreciation of the party's complexity was aided most not by a conscious attempt to attend other parties or listen to whatever the custodians had to say on various topics, but by the accidental memory of reading *King Lear*, that famous tale of injudicious and unhappy retirement.

But why the reprise of these disparate moments, each one long since presented in considerable detail in its own context? To what purpose the disinterment of old articles and books, their attempted reintroduction into scholarly circulation? What's new in all this old hat? Two events inspired this essay: first, I read an astonishingly uncomprehending review of one of my books (the one about the Ozark singers [Cochran 1999]); and second, only weeks later, I was asked for a contribution to a discussion of "New Directions in the Study of Oral Tradition."<sup>4</sup> How can I manage this with any confidence, I asked myself, when my own efforts in the field are directed to purposes so far removed from current emphases as to be incomprehensible? This essay, then, is an attempt to be more explicit about the goals of my own studies, to get them up on the discursive screen, if possible, and then to nominate such goals as worthy candidates for future work by other investigators. I'm suggesting, then, to bring this essay's purposes to a belated explicit and generalized statement: namely, that students of oral tradition might profitably turn to just such figures as the Ozark schoolgirl, the Romanian jokers, and the custodians moonlighting as party consultants.

They seem at first glance an unpromising lot—incomparably less glamorous than epic *guslari* or Anglo-American balladeers. They live at a substantial remove from the great performance venues of oral tradition—in fact, they might be most appropriately described as *audiences* of the performances that have been at the heart of oral traditional studies. But that's precisely the point: isn't it of compelling interest to wonder what characteristically happens *after* the epics or the ballads have been sung, after the jokes have been told? Wouldn't it be exciting to see how the song, the

---

<sup>4</sup> See my "Performing Off Stage: Oral Tradition Under the Radar" (2003). For a heterogeneous sampling of oral traditions, past and present, see *Oral Tradition*, 18, i-ii.



poem, the joke, the prophylactic charm or baneful hex, live on in the lives of those who only hear them, only know them? In such modest figures the scholar may by patient attention witness the ongoing, real-life operation of oral tradition, see it functioning in all its protean power at points far removed from its performance origins. That's no small payoff.

I have no suggestions, however, as to *method*. My own procedures, as best I can recall them, seem now so haphazard, so rooted in a mere "hanging around" in anticipation of that serendipitous moment when the juxtaposition of two apparently disconnected elements sparks a recognition of heretofore unrecognized pattern, that it would be perverse to offer them as models for the work of others. (The only justification would be the investigator's pleasure.) The television news program, the family memoir, the famous tragedy—their utility is apparent only in retrospect, and applicable only to the specific instance. The student of folksong might watch weeks of newscasts in vain; the investigator of jokes might read all of Shakespeare and learn nothing useful.

But I'll end by confessing I don't really believe it. My deepest methodological claim is striking at least in its cavalier bravado—I believe no painstaking attention is ever wholly wasted, that the investigator who nurtures a nearly obsessive interest in whatever topic will over time develop a nearly preternatural power of helpful association. Such reasoning leads, I know, to the bizarre assertion that *any* experience can stimulate insight. Somewhere in Shakespeare there are lines or scenes to lead not just the student of retirement parties but also the student of Ozark folksong or Romanian jokes to an enabling insight; in every month's newscasts there are stories to lead not just the investigator of jokes but also the investigator of retirement parties or Ozark folksongs to profound appreciations. I'll buy that.

This essay's core, then, is the notion of what I have called "oblique performance." The idea that the group of University of Arkansas custodians organizing their festival in honor of their supervisor are "performing" a traditional drama entitled "The Retirement Party" will not really stretch anyone's imagination, but I've not seen it suggested before that actions like those of the Ozark schoolgirl with her little bonfire or the Romanians celebrating Ceausescu's death are appropriately understood as performances, however oblique, of the song "Dear Charlie" or the joke "Ceausescu's Youngest Son." The hopes, of course, are first that the notion of "oblique performance" might itself prove fruitful, and, second, that other researchers may develop more systematic methods of investigation.

### References

- Allen 1978 Alma [Billie] Allen. *A Way of Life*. Unpublished memoir, bound and printed by the author's daughters in 1978 as a fifty-first anniversary present.
- Cochran 1989 Robert Cochran. "'What Courage': Romanian 'Our Leader' Jokes." *Journal of American Folklore*, 102:259-74.
- Cochran 1992 \_\_\_\_\_. "Rite of Passage: Retirement Party." In *Arkansas Folklore Sourcebook*. Ed. by W. K. McNeil and William M. Clements. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press. pp. 214-25.
- Cochran 1999 \_\_\_\_\_. *Singing in Zion*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Cochran 2003 \_\_\_\_\_. "Performing Off Stage: Oral Tradition Under the Radar." *Oral Tradition*, 18:253-54.
- Dugaw 1983 Dianne Dugaw. "'Dreams of the Past': A Collection of Ozark Songs and Tunes." *Mid-America Folklore*, 11, ii.
- McNeil and Clements  
1992 W. K. McNeil and William M. Clements. *An Arkansas Folklore Sourcebook*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Randolph 1980 Vance Randolph. *Ozark Folksongs*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.