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An Analysis of the Use of Folk Materials in the Works of Stephen Vincent Benét

Dodd Vernon

VERNON

FOLK MATERIALS
IN
THE WORKS
OF BENET

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF FOLK MATERIALS IN THE WORKS OF STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

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A Question of Significance

Folklore as literary material. The completion of any literary man's life brings with it the question of a final estimate of his work. Sometimes a correct and accepted judgment is formed even during an author's lifetime. But in other cases, as in that of Herman Melville, a final evaluation may be long delayed. Many obstacles to a clear view of a writer's worth may exist. He may be in tune with a body of thought and taste characteristic of some period other than his own. Thus, he may be intellectually ahead of his time. Critics, consciously or not, may consider his contemporary popularity or lack of popularity, to his advantage or disadvantage. Personal friendships may be a factor in forming opinions. Certain values in a work may lie unappreciated until pointed out by those with greater powers of discernment.

Into this uncertain area of critical assessment a few--a very few--observers have begun to venture with regard to Stephen Vincent Benét. That author's death in 1943, and publication of his remaining final work in 1946, will call forth in all likelihood further attempts to estimate his significance in American literature. In the opinion of

Henry W. Wells of Columbia University, such an estimate may not be quickly and easily reached:

> America has lost, then, an important man of letters and public servant. . . . Has literature sustained a loss comparable to that of the country itself, or even greater? It is too early to give a thoroughly considered answer to the question. And there are always many kinds of answers to such a query. The more critical and philosophical must distinguish strength and weakness as mingled throughout all his imaginative works--novels, stories, and poems. The more pragmatic and practical reply merely attempts to tell us which of his books, if any, are likely to survive and which to be forgotten. Obviously, the thorough analysis requires much time and space; the simpler and more practical course is at the moment the only one really available.[1]

The thorough analysis to which Wells refers is not likely to result from a single examination. The "many kinds of answers" which he anticipates will require a variety of approaches. Many factors go into the literary worth of a writer's output, and each calls for consideration. Complexity in the case of Benét is increased by his versatility, since he worked in the fields of lyric poetry, epic, novel, short story, radio drama, war propaganda, and history.

In assessing Benét's worth, one of the factors which requires scrutiny is his practice of delving frequently into the storehouse of folklore. In this respect he stood out in a generation of writers which to a great extent was sophisticated and somewhat contemptuous of native, homely,

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[1] Henry W. Wells, "Stephen Vincent Benet," College English, V (October, 1943), 9.

made-in-America culture. Questions arise, and must be answered, as to whether folk materials in his works constitute a major and worthwhile contribution to twentieth century literature; whether his manner of using such materials has a significance of its own; and whether this factor in Benét's writing indicates a desirable direction for our literature as a whole. Christopher La Farge, in suggesting an approach to the study of Benét's narrative poetry, sees the need for research in three lines: poetic technique, quality of characterization, and the poems' "need for being."[2] To each of these three methods of attack Benét's use of folk materials bears a direct relation. Folk forms have influenced his poetic technique. Folk matter has been used in characterization. And, finally, folk aspirations are inextricably interwoven with the basic philosophy which underlies much of his work.

The problem undertaken by this study is an investigation of the use of folk materials by Benét, and the values to be observed in such a use. From the evidence to be assembled here, it is hoped to create firmer ground for a final estimate of that author's worth. It is a problem which does not call for an analysis of the writer's entire range of powers, or his lack of them. It does, however, seek to

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[2] Christopher La Farge, "The Narrative Poetry of Stephen Vincent Benét," Saturday Review of Literature, XXVII (August 5, 1944), 106.

contribute something in one particular field which otherwise might, for a time, be overlooked.

A fair field--not full of folk. Room for a great deal of study exists, not only with regard to folklore in Benét's writings, but also with regard to all phases of his work. Published books by literary historians and critics give, as a rule, only scant attention to Stephen Vincent Benét. When he is mentioned it is usually in somewhat cursory fashion, and only as the author of John Brown's Body. A History of American Poetry 1900-1940 by Gregory and Zaturenska considers Benét as a study in popularity. A few articles have appeared. Notable among them is Paul L. Wiley's "The Phaeton Symbolism in John Brown's Body," which appeared in American Literature. There is also the Wells article which has been quoted, and certain sketches, largely biographical, such as those written for The Saturday Review of Literature by William Rose Benét, Leonard Bacon, Christopher La Farge, and Christopher Morley.

None of this slight amount of attention has been directed to Benét's use of folklore. Wiley's meticulous examination is in a related field. He is interested, however, in the recurrent figure of Phaeton not because that figure represents a type of folklore, but because of the symbolic implications. It is not surprising that attention should first be directed to aspects of Benét's work other than folk materials. The obvious fact that thrusts itself upon any reader

is that Benét was absorbed with the need for maintaining American democracy and ideals. A full appreciation of this interest, however, must recognize in the final analysis the folk culture which pervades Benét's work. Democracy is of and for the great mass of people, among whom the folk heritage lives.

The conclusion is inescapable, then, that a study of the folk content of Benét's writings is overdue. This is particularly the case when an observer like Wells comes no closer to an appreciation of the folk values in John Brown's Body than the following statement:

> An epic is, according to traditional views formulated in criticism from Arnold to Lessing, in part naive; and Benét's character and youth aided him in achieving such an outlook. . . . His early residence in all the chief sections of the country helped to make his realization of America less bookish than real. He held may [sic] qualifications for his task.[3]

Importance of the Problem

It will be well to establish, in the beginning, the importance of a study of folklore--not only in Benét's work, but in the work of any writer. This is necessary because, in the opinion of some, folklore has fallen into disrepute as contrasted with "literary" writing. Such a situation results, as Constance Rourke has pointed out, because much of the collecting and recording of folklore has been

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[3] Wells, op. cit., p. 11.

in the hands of a type of antiquarian who is interested primarily in quaintness, and not in relating his materials to life and literature.[4] The actual importance of folk materials in literature may be demonstrated by a review of the critical opinions of a number of persons who have given serious thought to the matter, and by a brief survey of how the tendency already has become a trend of importance in American literature.

Critical views. William Wordsworth emphasized the folk element in literature when, in his preface to the Lyrical Ballads, he wrote:

> The principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men. . . . Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust), because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and

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[4] Constance Rourke, The Roots of American Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 25.

> the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of the repeated experience and regular feelings, is a far more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who. . . separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression. . . .[5]

Wordsworth, of course, was concerned with that aspect of the folk which is productive of beauty, as was Agnes Repplier sixty years ago when she published her Books and Men. In a chapter entitled "On the Benefits of Superstition," she wrote:

> [Unquestioning credulity] was closely associated with certain types of beauty, and beauty is one of the tonics now most earnestly recommended to our sick souls.[6]

As Wordsworth and Agnes Repplier saw the inherent beauty in the diction and in the beliefs of the folk, with values which literature might absorb, so Constance Rourke saw advantages to a literature based on the utilitarian aspects of the folk arts. It should be noted in this connection that her definition of "utilitarian" is very broad, being formulated from the standpoint of what is beneficial to human beings. "Concern. . . with the arts as a common utility provides a broad approach to American culture," she

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[5] Paul Robert Lieder and Robert Withington, The Art of Literary Criticism (New York: D. Appleton Company, 1941), pp. 342-343.

[6] Agnes Repplier, Books and Men (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1888), p. 86.

wrote. "The main values must remain human values."[7] Those arts which have sprung from the common people, she believes, most nearly supply these values.

In the eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried von Herder called for a literature which would go to the folk for form and content. His emphasis was on the inherent fitness of the national patterns which he maintained each folk culture assumes. Constance Rourke quotes with approval his opinion that poets must turn from literary sources to the folk, and listen to their speech and song.[8]

Paul L. Wiley points out still another value in the use of folk figures in literature, when he shows in detail the manner in which the Phaeton myth serves as a symbol in John Brown's Body. The story of Jack Ellyat is a study in character development, he says, with Phaeton being Jack's own symbol of a full, satisfying life. With the change from eager youth to disillusionment when romantic notions vanish, and with the acceptance of realities, the glamor of Phaeton undergoes marked changes in Jack's mind.[9]

The variety of America requires a corresponding variety of material for its interpretation. For this need,

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[7] Rourke, op. cit., p. 59.

[8] Ibid., p. 24.

[9] Paul L. Wiley, "The Phaeton Symbolism in John Brown's Body," American Literature XVII (November, 1945), 231-242.

the distinctive facets of regional folklore provide what may be one answer. The fact that it is adaptable for such a purpose is evident in Lucy Lockwood Hazard's discussion of frontier themes.

> . . . most of the American folklore is centered not in occupation but in section. By far the largest proportion of this indigenous literature belongs to the isolated districts of the South.[10]

Examples, she says, are ballads of the mountain sections, Texas cowboy songs, Tennessee legends and Kentucky tall tales.

Such materials have played an important part in American culture, much more than would have been the case had colonization been attended by less strenuous conditions. Noble says:

> The environment of seventeenth-century America was favorable to the preservation of only those portions of the cultural heritage that had become ingrained in the customs and folklore of the people. The intense struggle for survival left little time for books or the contemplation of the brilliant intellectual achievements of contemporary Europe.[11]

This consideration provides a background for better understanding of Constance Rourke's emphasis on the utilitarian tradition in American culture.

In the opinion of Guerber, folk legend, such as Benét

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[10] Lucy Lockwood Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1927), p. 79.

[11] Stuart G. Noble, A History of American Education (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1938), p. 21.

made use of in John Brown's Body is indispensable to the epic. He declares that mythology and legend are the main elements of that form of literature. Epics, he says, generally have been the fruit of the earliest experience of nature and life on the part of imaginative races.[12] His comments apply to folk epics, but it may be suggested that the literary epic may gain vigor by drawing material from the same fountainhead.

Stressing social and esthetic aspects of literature, Thomas M. Pearce suggests that writing may be "valued primarily for its success in showing fully the folk traditions of a country in their highest form as they make for better human relationships," and adds:

> Anything worthy in the oral and written record of the peoples who have lived where this nation has been formed becomes part of the history of national letters. I do not believe such a view will weaken the esthetic distinction of our letters but will strengthen it.[13]

Harrison Smith, in considering fantasy, which is one form of the folk creative manner, discusses that element largely from the standpoint of technique or craftsmanship. Fantasy, he says is

> . . . a literary device that is as old as religion itself. We have been accustomed to fantasy in myths

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[12] H. A. Guerber, The Book of the Epic (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1913), p. 15.

[13] Thomas M. Pearce, "American Traditions and Our Histories of Literature," American Literature, XIV (November, 1942), 283.

> and folklore, in stories for children. . . . We have seen an increasing use of fantasy in sections of novels that are otherwise solidly attached to the earth and to human beings. . . as a way of explaining intangible aspects of behavior and thought. It serves also to break up the deadly exhaustion of themes into which the novel has fallen, in the same way that the psychoanalist has in the last twenty years added another dimension to fiction.[14]

The foregoing attitudes toward a folk element in literature possess the advantage of being specific in their implications. We may consider other attitudes which, while they risk the loss of a definite, specific application, yet achieve a general and basic position which more nearly covers the entire situation. Those who attempt such generalizations usually see folk culture as being the "heart" or the "vitality" of literary culture. Richard M. Dorson is among them:

> American literary history gives as yet little attention to folklore, apart from a passing nod to frontier tall tales, cowboy ballads, and synthetic Paul Bunyan legends. Yet folk literature, in its many and varied forms, lies at the heart of our literary culture, and raw folk material has frequently stimulated creative writers.[15]

George Moore, the Irish novelist, in his Avowals (1919) went a little farther into the matter. He is quoted by J. Donald Adams as follows:

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[14] Harrison Smith, "The Rise of Fantasy in Literature," American Scholar, XVII (Summer, 1948), 305.

[15] Richard M. Dorson, reviewer, "B. A. Botkin, A Treasury of New England Folklore," American Literature, XX (March, 1948), p. 76.

> [Art] begins in the irresponsible imaginations of the people, like a spring in a mountain waste; the spring rises amid rocks, trickles and forms a rivulet, swells into a stream and after many wanderings, perhaps after a brief sojourn in artifical ponds and basins, it returns to the earth whence it came. And, if this be the natural history of art, Homer is art emerging out of folk, and Sophocles is art at the extreme point of culture--the point at which art must begin to decay.[16]

Adams himself presses this point, and says that if Moore's theory is correct, the revitalization of art demands the reintroduction of the folk quality. Present-day literature, art, sculpture and architecture, he believes, are groping for that quality in their more experimental ventures.[17]

Ernest E. Leisy also has provided a similar generalization in an attempt to cover the whole relationship of folklore and literature:

> Increasingly it has become manifest that, if we are to have a native cultural tradition, our literature must reach down to the roots. Alongside our classic folk literature is a homelier strain, sometimes apparent in ethnic or other minority groups. It is to these folk elements that twentieth century writers are turning more and more. . . folk sources have given richness to much of the best and most characteristic American literature.[18]

There is only one field of vital disagreement between the individuals who have been quoted. Adams sees folk culture as something which is slipping away rapidly from

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[16] J. Donald Adams, The Shape of Books to Come (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p. 171.

[17] Ibid., p. 172.

[18] Ernest E. Leisy, "Folklore in American Literature," College English, VIII (December, 1946), 128-129.

the American scene. He believes that "as civilizations mature it becomes harder to recapture that quality."[19] Leisy, on the other hand, believes that a true American folk culture is yet to be developed, and that much of what we have regarded as "American" folklore is only the remnant of imported European matter, aristocratic or peasant in nature. He says:

> Compared with European cultures our folk imagination is yet young. Too few years have passed for the customs of the folk to react upon the American character and to be absorbed into our literature. The variety of our climate, geography, and racial strains has stimulated material progress, but this very diversity has militated against the rapid crystallization of our folklore.[20]

Literary precedents. Not only is there ample critical support for a generous use of folk elements in literature, but there is evidence of a valid tradition for such a practice by American writers. A study showing Stephen Vincent Benét to have handled such materials well should tend to place him higher in the literary scale than he otherwise might be. The tradition started early. The folk idea of the comic Irishman was prominent in H. H. Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry, and the popular conception of Jonathan materialized on the stage in Royal Tyler's The Contrast.

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[19] Adams, op. cit., p. 172.

[20] Leisy, op. cit., p. 123.

The entire roster of American authors who used folklore in literature cannot, of course, be catalogued, but a few may be mentioned to show the extent of the tradition. Washington Irving, though working in the "genteel tradition," placed old world legends in American settings, and exploited demonology in certain of his tales. William Cullen Bryant and John Greenleaf Whittier went to folk culture for the subject of much of their poetry. Hawthorne's writings reveal a preoccupation with such folk materials as the plague, a veil, plants with mystical potency, strange omens and mysterious deaths. Simms used the legends of Marion, the swamp fox, and of Murrell and his gang. Kennedy, Carruthers and Cooke glamorized the South with the myth of the cavalier. Longfellow made folk legends the subjects of his long poems, Hiawatha and Evangeline, as well as of numerous short poems. Lowell ranged from Arthurian legends to the New England rustic. Melville used the folk story of the great white whale. Mary Noailles Murfree, George W. Cable, and Joel Chandler Harris dealt largely with folk matter. Mark Twain in his Mississippi River and Western stories went directly to the folk.

In more recent years Vachel Lindsay, Roark Bradford, Carl Sandburg, John Steinbeck, Archibald MacLeish and others have carried on the tradition.

Method of Examination

Certain methods will be used in making this study, which should be outlined before launching into the main body of the analysis. The term "folk materials" needs to be defined, sources mentioned, procedures and organization clarified.

Definitions. Stith Thompson gives one of the simplest and most workable definitions of folklore, in terms of its principal attribute: "The essential quality of folklore is that it is traditional."[21] The scope of the definition may be extended by including Martha Warren Beckwith's statement: "It seems logical to admit within the scope of folklore all forms in which folk fantasy finds expression, whether in household arts or in household sayings, whether among European or primitive cultures."[22] Folk materials, then, for the purpose of this study, are all matters of the imagination which enjoy traditional life among the folk--the mass of the people, of any area. The scope of such material can be illustrated only by naming specific examples. Martha Warren Beckwith says:

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[21] Stith Thompson, "Folklore," Dictionary of World Literature (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 244.

[22] Martha Warren Beckwith, Folklore in America (Poughkeepsie, New York: Vassar College, The Folklore Foundation, 1931), p. 6.

> Certainly no group of folklorists questions the place of popular forms of oral art in the field of folklore, together with those beliefs and customs of the folk which underlie them. Such are story forms, songs, game formulas, riddles and proverbs, the oath, curse, and charm; beliefs about that inner world of imaginary beings which live in fantasy; omens and signs which become emotionally accredited, especially those that add a subjective element to the practical knowledge of medicine; and ideas represented by those spell-like rituals by which children today control the weather or animal life, bring luck or avert bad luck, determine wishes and the destiny of marriage; the secret word-play that will cure warts, drive rats from a house, control a cow's cud or reconcile bees to the death of a master; or, in the last instance, counting-out formula or sheer rigmarole dear to the heart of children and childlike peoples and not unrecognized among the esthetic delights of the elite. Language, too, so far as it implies a poetic thought--what we call the "picturesque" speech of the folk and that which is bound up in folk custom and belief. . . . Folk-dance and drama, ritual customs practiced by the folk in connection with planting and the harvest or with other sorts of industrial life, have also been drawn into the field of folklore because of the rich contribution they make to folk fantasy. Folk music, also, although this is so highly specialized an art as to require expert treatment.[23]

Examination of this description reveals three essential fields of folk materials: first, beliefs (ghosts, omens, many types of superstitions); second, vocal matter (legends, tall tales, proverbs, songs, folk drama); and third, actions (folk arts, dances, games, rituals).

These definitions and examples cover the nature and scope of folk materials. A third matter should be clarified--the requirements as to origin and transmission. Folklore, in the sense used by this study, need not be entirely

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[23] Beckwith, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

unlettered and oral. Thompson recognizes that "literary tales have been taken over by the people so completely that the literary origin has been completely forgotten."[24] Elsewhere he says:

> The quality that determines whether a particular story is a folktale or not would seem to be the fact that it is handed down traditionally, whether by word of mouth or on the written or printed page. . . they have established themselves as part of a traditional store of tales of some group of people, whether literate or illiterate. . . the study of the folktale is concerned with both the literary and oral tradition. No sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between the two, for the material flows freely from one channel into the other.[25]

Richard M. Dorson, pointing out examples of folk materials circulated and preserved by publication, cites humor in the pre-Civil War newspapers.[26]

Sources. The primary sources for the present study are the works of Stephen Vincent Benét--poems, novels, short stories and various types of propaganda literature. Virtually everything of Benet's ever printed in book form has been examined, despite the fact that some of the earlier work is of little value in itself. In the relatively immature works may be traced the roots of tendencies which later become significant.

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[24] Stith Thompson, "Historical-Geographical Method," Dictionary of World Literature (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 298.

[25] Stith Thompson, "Folktale," Dictionary of World Literature (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1943), pp. 246-248.

[26] Richard M. Dorson, Jonathan Draws the Long Bow (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 13.

Other publications have been consulted in appraising the folk materials in Benét's writings. Certain critical books and articles bearing on folklore in literature, and certain writings on the nature and attributes of folklore, have been cited in this chapter. Other publications of the same general nature will be mentioned in the body of the thesis, particularly such references as will show analogies between Benet's characters, incidents and forms, and similar matter in recorded folklore.

Procedure and organization. The remainder of this thesis will take up, in turn, John Brown's Body, Western Star, the shorter poems, the short stories, the novels and the propaganda writings which include radio dramas, speeches and American history. Each group of the writings will be analyzed for specific instances of folk materials which occur therein, and at the end of each chapter an evaluation of the use of such materials will be made. The thesis will conclude with a summary of the findings for the study as a whole.

CHAPTER II

JOHN BROWN'S BODY

"The Carver of Totems"—Conception of the Poem

"Certain beasts and skies and faces." For more than three hundred years his people had lived in the land that he loved. For more than three hundred years they had struggled toward their goal, toward the kind of people they would eventually be. Throughout that time they had loved, they had hated, they had sung, they had fought. They had even fought each other, and that winepress of human blood, it seemed to him, shaped the final form of his race.

So, he sat--Stephen Vincent Benét--with images of the past vivid in his mind, carving out a representation of those images. It was typical of the man that he did not speak of histories or epics. He spoke, not only in the language of the people, but from the very thoughts and beliefs, and through the very imagery of the people:

> My cyclorama is not the shape of the world
> Nor even the shape of this war from first to last,
> But like a totem carved, like a totem stained
> With certain beasts and skies and faces of men
> That would not let me be too quiet at night
> Till they were figured.[1]

Such was the conception of John Brown's Body.

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[1] Stephen Vincent Benét, John Brown's Body (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928), p. 282.

Yet, in attempting to present a "totem" which would represent the real America, he realized only too well the difficulty of welding the mass of detail into something which would approximate the spirit of his country and its people. In his invocation to the American muse with which the poem begins, he presents the problem:

> So how to see you as you really are,
> So how to suck the pure distillate, stored
> Essence of essence from the hidden star
> And make it pierce like a riposting sword.
>
> For, as we hunt you down, you must escape
> And we pursue a shadow of our own
> That can be caught in a magician's cape
> But has the flatness of a painted stone.[2]

Benét recognizes the failures which litter the way toward a truly American poetry:

> So many men have tried to understand
> But only made it smaller with their art,
> Because you are as various as your land
> . . . . . .
> They tried to fit you with an English song
> And clip your speech into the English tale.
> But, even from the first, the words went wrong,
> The catbird pecked away the nightingale.[3]

<u>The Variety of America</u>. Anything truly representative of America must be "as various as your land"--the snow of an Eastern town, the "close-huddled furnace of the city street," the factory with its chaos of sound, the bare hills covered with poppies--his totem must be as diverse as that.

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[2] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 5.

[3] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 4-5.

But diversity was not enough. The legends, the traditions, the tunes of the past--that vast store of material, living and dead, which we call "folk," must be used in shaping his images. He says:

> To strive at last. . .
> To build again that blue, American roof
> Over a half-forgotten battle-tune
>
> And call unsurely, from a haunted ground
> Armies of shadow and the shadow-sound.
>
> In your Long House there is an attic-place
> Full of dead epics and machines that rust,
> And there, occasionally, with casual face,
> You come awhile to stir the sleepy dust;
>
> Neither in pride nor mercy, but in vast
> Indifference at so many gifts unsought,
> The yellowed satins, smelling of the past,
> And all the lucky loot the pirates brought.[4]

A definite recognition that the treasures of America's "attic place" are found in our folk inheritance and not in our inheritance of art is evident when Benét says:

> And should that task seem fruitless in the eyes
> Of those a different magic sets apart
> To see through the ice-crystal of the wise
> No nation but the nation that is Art,
>
> Their words are just. But when the birchbark-call
> Is shaken with the sound that hunters make
> The moose comes plunging through the forest-wall. . . .[5]

Benét is the moose who cannot resist the appeal of the homely, typically American elements in our civilization. He is not dogmatic, and is willing to admit that he speaks for

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[4] Ibid., p. 7.

[5] Ibid., p. 6.

himself, granting the merits of those "a different magic sets apart." Still, in the description of pure art divorced from the folk as seeing "through the ice-crystal of the wise," the implication of coldness cannot be dismissed. Another evidence of an avowed espousal of folklore in literature is seen in the lines:

> Art has no nations--but the mortal sky
> Lingers like gold in immortality.[6]

"The mortal sky," considered in conjunction with the context, symbolizes the very human, typically folk material with which Benét works.

Tools of the Totem-Maker--Benét and Folklore

His interest in folk materials. Benét sets forth, then, the manner in which he proposes to write John Brown's Body. If he says he is going to use folk materials, we are justified in asking if he has an awareness, a real knowledge, of the tools he proposes to use. A strong indication that he took a conscious, intelligent interest in America's folk heritage is found in several sections of the poem, and may be illustrated by two excerpts. The first is a description of Appalachian mountain people:

> They are a curious and most native stock,
> . . . . . .
> They keep the beechwood fiddle and the salt
> Old-fashioned ballad-English of our first
> Rowdy, corn-liquor-drinking, ignorant youth;
> . . . . . .

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6 Ibid., p. 6.

A pioneer-island is a world that has
No use for pioneers--the unsplit rock
Of Fundamentalism, calomel,
Clan-virtues, clannish vices, fiddle-tunes
And a hard God.
They are our last frontier.
. . . . . .
One need not weep romantic tears for them,
But when the last moonshiner buys his radio,
And the last, lost, wild-rabbit of a girl
Is civilized with a mail-order dress,
Something will pass that is American
And all the movies will not bring it back.
They are misfit and strange in our new day. . . .[7]

The other selection is from the story of John Brown's execution, after his trial and conviction brought about by the Harper's Ferry raid:

The North that had already now begun
To mould his body into crucified Christ's,
Hung fables about those hours--saw him move
Symbolically, kiss a negro child,
Do this and that, say things he never said,
To swell the sparse, hard outlines of the event
With sentimental omen.
It was not so.[8]

Knowledge of sources, scope and control. Three things affecting Benét's use of folk materials are evident in the foregoing passages. The first is an awareness of the dual source of such materials. In the mountaineers he sees the folk heritage of an older culture. John Brown's Body is rich not only in transplanted English folklore, but also in non-Anglo-Saxon lore. At the same time, Benét knows that Americans themselves have "hung fables" about

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[7] Ibid., pp. 71-72.

[8] Ibid., p. 51.

persons and events in their own land, and that the making of folklore did not cease with the landing of the Pilgrims.

The very legend that he mentions--the story of John Brown kissing the negro child--was given circulation by no less a poet than John Greenleaf Whittier, with no indication that he does not accept it as true, in "Brown of Ossawatomie":

> And lo! a poor slave-mother with her little child pressed nigh.
> Then the bold, blue eye grew tender, and the old harsh face grew mild,
> As he stooped between the jeering ranks and kissed the negro child![9]

Benét also demonstrated, in the passages on the mountaineers and on the John Brown fable, another fundamental knowledge essential to the most effective use of folk materials. He shows a grasp of the extent and the varieties of materials which grow up traditionally. There are the "fables," the legends of heroes, ghosts, treasure; nursery tales, and yarns of exaggeration. There are the "fiddle-tunes" which are imported and indigenous--spirituals, ballads, love songs, occupational songs, prison laments and other types. He mentions folk customs--"clan-virtues, clannish vices," the "moonshiner," the primitive medical lore--the category which can include everything from folk games to table manners. Folk beliefs are touched on in the

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[9] Burton Egbert Stevenson, Poems of American History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936), p. 396.

mention of "the unsplit rock of Fundamentalism," and assume a major role in the poem, particularly those of a supernatural nature. The "old-fashioned ballad English" is a form of folk speech. Folk arts and crafts are represented in the allusion to the "beechwood fiddle."

The citation of these passages does not imply that the types of folk material Benét uses are all Appalachian in nature. The same classification fits the folklore of any group, and many groups are represented in John Brown's Body.

The third fact which may be derived from the lines cited is that Benét uses folk materials in a critical, controlled manner. He does not "weep romantic tears for them," and indulges in no revels of folklore for its own sake. He views it rather as something "that is American" and to be used for that reason--the inner spirit that it represents. Also, in the passage on John Brown's execution, there is apparent a sense of discrimination, a sifting out of what is true and what is purely fable. It would have been possible to piece together in rhyme a story of the Civil War which was almost entirely legendary in the sense of being untruthful, and Benét obviously is desirous of shunning any step in that direction. It is true that he uses much that cannot be justified on a basis of literal, physical fact. The thunder of ghostly cavalry in the sky as an omen of the war

is of that nature. Such matter is used in an obviously allegorical sense, however, and the discriminating reader will not cavil on that score. The important point is that the author's folk materials are subject to artistic control and are used to show the real character of the individual or the group with which they are associated.

These three approaches will serve as a means of examination for the folk materials in John Brown's Body--the national or racial sources of the material; the classes of material according to form; and, most important of all, the effectiveness of the use of such materials in bringing to life the persons to whom they are attributed.

The connecting theme. The "half-forgotten battle-tune" which Benét announces, in the invocation, that he will use as a unifying theme for his poem, is "John Brown's Body." Lines from the song recur at intervals throughout the poem, but nowhere is even a substantial part of it quoted. This is typical of a practice of Benét throughout the poem. Rich as it is in allusions to ballads, legends and other such materials, there is nowhere any extensive quoting. Such songs as are given in full are, so far as I can ascertain, of Benét's own writing, using the manner and even some of the words of known folklore--but still definitely his own. However, because of the prominent place given the song "John Brown's Body" in the very structure

of the poem, it may be of interest to quote here the song in its entirety. Charles Sprague Hall is said to have written the lines which became the marching song of the Union army, and which are as follows:

John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the grave,
His soul is marching on!
Chorus: Glory! Glory Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory Hallelujah!
His soul is marching on.

He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord!
His soul is marching on.

John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back.
His soul is marching on.

His pet lambs will meet him on the way,
And they'll go marching on.

They'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree,
As they go marching on.

Now for the Union let's give three rousing cheers,
As we go marching on.[10]

The selection of a symbolic theme for a poem of the magnitude of John Brown's Body is determined, of course, by reasons more impressive than the popularity of a marching song. No serious work on the first World War and its world-wide results would undertake to use "Hinkey, Dinkey, Parlez-vous," in a similar manner. It is necessary, for the use of the song to be significant, that it and the figure whom it immortalizes be of significance. A few examples

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[10] Ibid., p. 397.

show the type of impact which Brown made, not merely on news of the day, but on poetry which stayed more or less prominently in the eye of the public through the Civil War and afterward.

Even before Brown's execution on December 2, 1859, Edmund Clarence Stedman considered the death sentence of such national importance that he was moved to write a poem, "How Old Brown Took Harper's Ferry," in which he predicted that the death of Brown would be the inspiration of an anti-slavery crusade:

> But, Virginians, don't do it! for I tell you that the flagon
> Filled with blood of old Brown's offspring was first poured
> by Satan's hands;
> And each drop from old Brown's life-veins, like the red
> gore of the dragon,
> May spring up, a vengeful Fury, hissing through your slave-
> worn lands!
> And Old Brown
> Ossawatomie Brown,
> May trouble you more than ever, when you've nailed his
> coffin down![11]

There also was early recognition in the South that Brown's attitude was closely identified with the composite attitude of the North and was behind the war spirit of that section. In 1861, the Rockingham, Virginia, Register published an anonymous verse which included the following stanza:

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[11] Ibid., p. 395. Other Northern poems on this theme were numerous. At least one entire book was made up of such poems: Echoes of Harper's Ferry (Boston; Thayer and Eldridge, 1860).

Old John Brown is dead and gone!
Still his spirit is marching on,--
Lantern-jawed, and legs, my boys,
Long as an ape's from Illinois![12]

The obvious allusion to Lincoln, it may be remarked in passing, was more impassioned than it was just, since Lincoln said that if he could save the Union only by letting slavery stand, he would take that course.

John Greenleaf Whittier, although he did not approve the militant nature of Brown's crusade, foresaw a continuing emphasis on Brown's basic ideals:

Perish with him the folly that seeks through evil good!
Long live the generous purpose unstained with human blood![13]

Edna Dean Proctor, writing her own variant of "John Brown's Body," makes Brown's spirit a direct factor in the Civil War:

John Brown's body through the world is marching on;
Hail to the hour when oppression shall be gone.[14]

A later poet who joined in setting Brown up as a symbol of Northern sentiment was Louise Imogene Guiney, who, in "John Brown: A Paradox," wrote:

Star-led for us, stumbled and groped John Brown,
Star-led, in the awful morasses to drown;
And the trumpet that rang for a nation's upheaval,
From the thought that was just, thro' the deed that was evil,
Was blown with the breath of this dumb John Brown!
. . . . . .

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[12] Ibid., p. 413.
[13] Ibid., p. 396.
[14] Ibid., p. 397.

Now we see, clear enough, looking back at the onset,
Christianity's flood-tide and Chivalry's sunset
In the old broken heart of our hanged John Brown![15]

Sources of Folk Materials in John Brown's Body

Allusions to the folk cultures of at least ten different races probably can be identified in John Brown's Body. They are classical (Greek or Roman), Hebrew or Biblical, Norse, old Celtic, French, English, modern Irish, African, American Indian, and American. Naturally, these elements are not represented equally. The major ones are Biblical, English and American. The Negro is well typified through folk materials, but in few cases can the matter be identified with any certainty as African. The culture of the southern white has been transferred to the Negro, and too often we regard traits as peculiar to the Negro race, which are borrowed from his erstwhile masters.

The classification of certain Biblical material as folklore may be questioned, since it is contained in the most widely-published book in the world. It should be remembered that much of this material is a record of Hebrew tradition formerly handed down by word of mouth for many generations. Also, its transmission among some groups in our own country, notably among Negroes and poor whites, is largely vocal. This has resulted in some variations from

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[15] Ibid., p. 398.

the text, as when Jonah's "great fish" is transformed into a "whale."

Classical. An effective use of classical myth is in the representation of Fate as a personified being who chose the site for the battle of Gettysburg. The Greeks and Romans supposed the Three Fates controlled the birth, events of life, and death of every man. One held the distaff, the second spun the thread of life, and the third cut it when life was ended.[16] Benét changes the sex of Fate, and says:

> You say fate rode a horse
> Ahead of those lumbering hosts, and in either hand
> He carried a skein of omen. And when, at last,
> He came to a certain umbrella-copse of trees
> . . . . . .
> He knotted the skeins together and flung them down
> With a sound like metal.
> . . . . . .
> Blind and deaf and a doom on a lunging horse,
> Threw down the skeins and gathered the battle there.[17]

Fate remains a woman in the thoughts of John Vilas, remembering when his wife was in childbirth:

> I can remember yet
> The terrible old woman with the shawl
> Who sat beside me, like deserted Fate,
> Cursing me with those eyes. . . .[18]

Biblical. Biblical allusions are frequent. One of the first found in the poem is put in the mouth of Captain Ball, the Yankee slave ship captain:

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[16] E. Cobham Brewer, Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (London: Cassell and Company, 1905), p. 448.

[17] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 252-253.

[18] Ibid., p. 224.

He touched the Bible. "And it's down there, Mister,
Down there in black and white--the sons of Ham--
Bondservants--sweat of their brows."[19]

The reference is to the curse of Noah, which is described as follows in the Authorized Version of the Bible:

And Noah drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.
And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers without. . .
And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.
And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.[20]

Norse. Norse mythology furnishes the metaphor when Jack Ellyat, starved soldier, sees Harriet Vilas cooking mush in an iron pot:

The woman was a great Norn, in her pot she cooked a new world,
Made of pure vapors and the juices of unspoilt light,
A new globe of sulliless amber and grains of white corn,
An orbed perfection.[21]

Celtic. The ancient Celtic fairy world contributes the imagery when Ellyat first hears Melora Vilas' voice:

And Ellyat, lost and desperate in the wood,
Heard it, desirous as the elvish blast
Wound on a tiny horn of magic grass
To witch steel riders into a green hill.
He stumbled towards its music.[22]

French. Benét, declaring that some day the great epic of the Negro race will be written, chooses a black

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[19] Ibid., p. 12.

[20] Genesis, 9:21-25.

[21] Benét, John Brown's body, pp. 119-120.

[22] Ibid., pp. 118-119.

spear as the symbol of the race. For a comparison of this symbol with that of another race, he goes to medieval French legend, and says:

> That you will be a match for any song
> Sung by old, populous nations in the past,
> And stand like hills against the American sky,
> And lay your black spear down by Roland's horn.[23]

Roland was the nephew of Charlemagne. Set upon by the enemy at Roncesvalles, he sounded his horn to give his uncle notice of danger. At the third blast the birds fell dead and the horn broke in two. Charlemagne rushed to the rescue, but too late.[24]

English. An example of the type of English ballad which provides much of the folk background of the poem is "Lord Randall." Stuart Cazenove, a Georgia soldier, is represented as singing the song as he kills Yankees in the battle of Bull Run. There is an ironic aptness in introducing the ballad in this manner, since it is the song of a dying man who had had for breakfast "fresh trout and slow poison"; he begs his mother to "make my bed soon, / For I'm sick at my heart and I fain would lie down."[25]

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[23] Ibid., p. 308.

[24] Brewer, op. cit., p. 1067.

[25] Louise Pound, American Ballads and Songs (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 3. Wording as used here (such ballads often have many variants) is from a version recorded in America by H. C. House of the University of Maryland, in which the title is given as "Johnny Randall" rather than "Lord Randall."

Modern Irish. A folk expression which has the earmarks of being Irish is found in the description of the Brown raid on Harper's Ferry, in which the bridge night-watchman, Patrick Giggins, is ordered by the raiders to halt.

> "Halt!" ordered a voice.
> He stopped a minute, perplexed. As he told men later,
> "Now I didn't know what 'Halt!' mint, any more
> Than a hog knows about a holiday."[26]

Perhaps the more usual form, at least in the Southwestern United States, is, "any more than a hog knows about heaven."

African. A practice widespread in its origin, but often looked upon in the United States as being African because of its greater currency among members of the Negro race, is that of destroying or damaging an image representing an enemy, who thereby is supposed to suffer injury. The custom is found among West Indian Negroes of non-English culture, as well as among some Negroes and poorly educated whites in this country. The superstition is utilized in John Brown's Body when Sally Dupre, jealous of a rival in love, Lucy Weatherby, says to herself:

> I will make an image of you, a doll in wax,
> I will pierce the little wax palms with silver bodkins.
> . . . . . .
> She thought: "Lucy Weatherby. Yes. I must look for a doll.
> I must make a doll with your face, an image of wax.
> I must call that doll by your name.[27]

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[26] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 27.

[27] Ibid., pp. 146, 154.

Daphne Harris takes note of this in a story called "The Silver Bullet," which was based on observations made in her native East Tennessee:

> . . . Them headaches may be caused by a bird a-carryin' yer hair, but 'tis more likely Stacy has got a-holt of some of hit, and kotched a live rabbit, an' put yore hair under hit's skin, and turned hit a-loose. An' tell that rabbit's kilt, you won't have no rest. Now, Lee Ann, frum now on, you do your hair up in a ball an' putt it in a stump, er someplace whar nothin' can git hit. . . .

And, later in the story,

> 'They hain't but one way,' replied Aunt Melissy seriously. 'Take an' draw her pitcher on a board, an' shoot through hit with a silver bullet. That'll kill a witch. . . .'[28]

There are many variations of the practice, many of which envision death or serious injury for the victim, others possibly going only so far as to express strong contempt, as this action of the runaway Negro Spade, who had a strong hatred for his master, Zachary:

> He drew a circle for Zachary's face in the ground
> And spat in the circle.[29]

<u>American Indian</u>. The totem, already mentioned, is from Indian culture. Another reference to matters Indian is in the invocation, where the American muse is described as

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[28] <u>Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society</u>, III (September, 1937), 62-63.

[29] Benét, <u>John Brown's Body</u>, p. 150.

A friend, an enemy, a sacred hag
With two tied oceans in her medicine bag.[30]

Description of the muse as carrying a "medicine bag" in which Indian medicine men would carry their charms, does much to integrate the classical figure of the muse with indigenous, folk background.

American. A large part of the folk materials woven into the poem is of American (not Indian) origin. A group of folk expressions, with the very breath of the soil and the frontier in them, is found in the meditation of Jack Ellyat on the eve of the Civil War. Now, he thinks, all sections of the United States are enjoying peace--"the tomahawk is buried in the prairie-sod." The territories which are clamoring for admission as states are described as

The buckskin-States, the buffalo-horned, the wild
Mustangs with coats the color of crude gold.
Their bodies, naked as the hunter's moon,
Smell of new grass and the sweet milk of the corn.
. . . . . .
They drag their skies and sunsets after them
Like calico ponies on a rawhide rope,
And who would ride them must have iron thighs
And a lean heart, bright as a bowie-knife.
Were they not foaled with treasure in their eyes
Between the rattlesnake and the painted rock?
Are they not matches for vaquero gods?
. . . . . .
And must they wait like spayed mares in the rain,
While Carolina and Connecticut
Fight an old quarrel out before a ghost?[31]

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[30] Ibid., p. 4.

[31] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

This is not the product of the academic mind, but a delving into the very stuff of life of the West, with its stockmen, cowboys, hunters, its forty-niners, buried treasure, Indian painted rocks, and scenery.

So much for the sources of origin.

Types of Materials Represented

Folk songs. When we come to survey the variety of types of folk materials in John Brown's Body, we are forced to give more attention to the song than to any other type, because there are such sharp differences in the many kinds of folk songs. Without attempting to cover the ground fully, we may give examples of four types, as indicating the scope of this field. Attention also will be devoted to Benét's indebtedness to the forms and mannerism of folklore for work of his own individual creation.

The ballad is a well-known form, and will be given full attention in a later section. Another of the song types imported from England and Scotland is the love lyric, which may approach the ballad through a rudimentary or implied narrative. Bailey, the gross, materialistic soldier who nevertheless has a deep-seated kindliness and loyalty, is represented as continually singing or humming "The Weaver's Song." It appears to be the only tune he knows. Benét, as in all other such cases, quotes only fragments.

The full song, omitting a stanza which is believed to be an interpolation, goes:

When I was a bach'lor, I lived by myself,
I worked at the weaver's trade;
The only, only thing I did that was wrong
Was to woo a fair young maid.
I wooed her in the winter-time
And in the summer, too;
And the only, only thing I did that was wrong
Was to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.

Oh, I am a bach'lor, I live with my son;
We work at the weaver's trade;
And ev'ry single time I look into his eyes
He reminds me of the fair young maid.
He reminds me of the winter-time
And of the summer too;
And the many, many time that I held her in my arms,
Just to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.[32]

Turning to a much lowlier but no less widespread type of English verse, we find Benét making use of the nursery song or rhyme. John Vilas, with whose daughter Jack Ellyat had fallen in love, was aware of the attraction of the two young people to each other:

John Vilas watched them go off through the wood
To get the water from the other spring,
The big pail clanking between them.
His hard mouth
Was wry with an old nursery rhyme. . . .[33]

The allusion, of course, is to the old jingle,

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To get a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.

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[32] Carl Sandburg, The American Songbag (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 15.

[33] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 123-124.

In the statement that "his hard mouth was wry," there is obviously an implication that Vilas believed the two were due to "fall" in a sense other than that which was meant in the old nursery rhyme.

The Negro spiritual, constituting one of the most important sections of American folksongs, comes into the poem through allusion and use of its form from time to time. As Sherman marches through Georgia, the Negroes are deluded by visions of a paradise for freedmen--"Lincum" handing out silver dollars, hills of barbecue, rivers of pot-likker, no work, and "all God's chillun got shoes there." This line is taken directly from the spiritual:

> I got shoes, you got shoes,
> All God's chillun got shoes.
> When I get to Heaven gonna put on my shoes
> An' walk all over God's Heaben. Heaben! Heaben!
> Ev'body talks about Heaben ain' goin' dere. Heaben! Heaben!

Just as Benét uses the song "John Brown's Body" to epitomize the spirit of the North, so does he use a song to sum up the feeling of Clay Wingate, Georgian, for the south--an emotional, exalted feeling:

> In Dixie land I'll take my stand,
> And live and die for Dixie!. . .[34]

The wording of these lines shows that Benét used the original version of the song which became the most popular of all southern war songs. The original words were written by Daniel D. Emmett, the once-famous negro minstrel, in

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[34] Ibid., p. 64.

1859, with the music said to be that of an old plantation melody. General Albert Pike wrote more formal words to the tune, and many other versions have been written. None except Emmett's and Pike's ever gained any great hold on the popular mind, however. The distinctive folk quality of Emmett's song may be seen by examining a typical verse:

Missus marry Will de weaber
William was a gay deceaber
Look away! look away! look away! Dixie land!
When he put his arm around her
He looked as fierce as a forty-pounder.
Look away! look away! look away! Dixie land!

Chorus:
Den I wish I was in Dixie. Hooray! Hooray!
In Dixie's land I'll take my stand, an' lib an' die in Dixie.
Away! Away! Away down south in Dixie!
Away! Away! Away down south in Dixie![35]

Benét changes one word, or possibly accepts a change which was made in popular singing during the war, and says "die for Dixie" rather than "die in Dixie." That change, physically minor though it is, raises the patriotic spirit of the song to a higher level than it would reach otherwise.

In contrast, the literary quality of Pike's version may easily be seen:

Southrons, hear your country call you!
Up, lest worse than death befall you!
To arms! To arms! To arms, in Dixie!
Lo! all the beacon fires are lighted,--
Let all hearts be now united!
To arms! To arms! To arms, in Dixie!

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[35] Louis Untermeyer, American Poetry From the Beginning to Whitman (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), p. 760.

Advance the flag of Dixie! Hurrah! Hurrah!
For Dixie's land we take our stand,
And live and die for Dixie!
To arms! To arms! And conquer peace for Dixie!
To arms! To arms! And conquer peace for Dixie![36]

Influence of the ballad form. Not only specific songs, but the influence of certain song-forms, are evident in John Brown's Body. This is true particularly of the ballad and the Negro spiritual. The form of the ballad is evident, for example, in the song of the thirteen sisters who allegorically represent the thirteen original states.[37] The most striking element corresponding to that of the ballad is the refrain. It is characteristic of the ballad to find "a refrain, even if sometimes meaningless."[38] So, in this song of the thirteen sisters, we find a refrain, varying in words but repetitive in the note of warning, ranging from "Have a care, my son," to "The sky is falling, my son." The selection under consideration exhibits other ballad characteristics. There is a degree of objectivity. There is repetition; "Have a care, my son," and "There is a ghost," are phrases which are repeated, and there is a measure of repetition in "The trees are shaking," and "The trees are breaking." The swift, simple, emotional, graphic

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[36] Stevenson, op. cit., p. 411.

[37] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 16-17.

[38] William Bradley Otis and Morriss H. Needleman, Outline-History of English Literature (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1939), I, 102.

narration typical of the ballad is found, in relating how the sisters lock themselves, apparently secure, in their house of Liberty, but sleep while the storm rises and the ghost walks. The song does not use dialogue, a frequent characteristic of the ballad, but in addressing "my son," it achieves the effect of the monologue with the result, as in dialogue, that the "story is hinted at rather than told in full."[39] The tradition of using mystical numbers in the ballad is carried out by the use of "thirteen." And, finally, there is parallelism of phrase and idea: "The walls are as solid as Plymouth Rock. . . . The door of seasoned New England stock," "The warehouse groans with cotton and wine, the cellar is full of scuppernong wine," and also the instances already cited as illustrating the repetition characteristic of the ballad.

The ballad-characteristic which is most lacking in the song of the thirteen sisters is freedom from figures of speech. The selection obviously is rich in imagery.

It is not suggested that Benét, in this passage, has created a song in true ballad form, but there is no doubt that that form has guided him in making a poem which has a certain flavor peculiar to the ballad and which is far different than it would have been without the folk ballad as a model.

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[39] Ibid., p. 102.

To a lesser extent this is true also of the passage dealing with the impressions, sensations and thoughts of Jack Ellyat in Tennessee.[40] There is a recurring refrain, "This is Jack Ellyat's tune, this is no tune but his." The story-telling factor is present, and the use of the word tune allies the passage with music, from which the ballad is inseparable. However, other elements of the ballad are absent here.

The refrain, reminiscent of the ballad, also is used to advantage in a description of how civilian life goes on despite war, with the repetition of "Anything's realer than war."[41]

The folk tale. Large as the folksong bulks in Benét's consciousness, he does not overlook the folk tale. John Vilas, wandering over the country with his daughter after his wife had returned to her home, is compared to various legendary characters.[42] Among these are two which already had been given attention earlier in the poem; John Brown himself, and Captain Ball, the Yankee slaver. In addition, he says,

> . . . you heard John Vilas was that same
> Lost Jew that wanders after every war
> But cannot die in any, being accurst.

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[40] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 98-104.

[41] Ibid., p. 232.

[42] Ibid., pp. 295, 298.

The legend of the wandering Jew is a common heritage of all peoples of European descent. Also

> He was the drummer who had lost his way
> At Valley Forge and frozen in the snow
> To rove forever more, a dread old man
> Beating a phantom drum across the wind.

Also, he is compared to "White-headed Time, stoop-shouldered on his scythe," a classical allusion. It is traditional to represent Time as an old man, quite bald except for a single lock on his forehead.[43] To realize how deeply and extensively this personification has become ingrained in the American national consciousness, one has only to examine popular cartoons depicting Father Time; and to realize that this bit of imagery has existed for many hundreds of years, at least, one has only to recall Shakespeare's allusion to "that bald sexton, Time."[44] Vilas himself says that it almost seems to him that he is

> . . . the deluded shade of Peter Rugg
> Still looking for his Boston through the storm.

The legendary Peter Rugg is a phantom old man traveling with his little daughter and doomed forever to drive madly about the roads of New England, inquiring the way to Boston and bringing rainstorms in his wake. He brought his predicament upon himself--"'Let the storm increase,' said Rugg, with a fearful oath, 'I will see home tonight, in

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[43] Brewer, op. cit., p. 1229.

[44] King John, iii, 1.

spite of the last tempest, or may I never see home!"[45]

And, Vilas likens himself to

> . . . the strange spook of Johnny Appleseed,
> Crept out of heaven on a windless night
> To see if his wild orchard prosper still.

The semi-legendary character Johnny Appleseed is better known than is Peter Rugg. He is said to have traveled through the frontier country of the old Northwest, planting appleseeds wherever he went so that settlers who came after him might have orchards. Actually, the legend of this philanthropic eccentric was created out of a real person, John Chapman, by the unconscious longing of the folk mind for color and kindliness. Chapman, a Yankee nurseryman, was born in Massachussetts in 1774 and died at Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1845. He operated fruit tree nurseries for immigrants moving west, selling trees as low as six and one-half cents each. Even during his life he was known familiarly as "Johnny Appleseed."[46]

Folk speech. Benet shows familiarity with folk speech; that is, expressions which take root in the life and activities of the people. This familiarity is displayed, for example, in his description of the Tennessee country which was considered a part of "the West" in 1862:

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[45] Ben C. Clough, The American Imagination at Work (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947), p. 367.

[46] Ibid., p. 555.

> . . . stretches and stretches where roughly-chinked log-cabins,
> Two shouts and a holler away from the nearest neighbors
> Stood in a wisp of open.[47]

The expression, "two shouts and a holler" depends for its flavor upon substituting the distance sound will carry for strict linear measurement. Its effectiveness is enhanced because it not only conveys an approximate idea of distance, but also provides a realization of the helpless isolation in case of real trouble, in a day before the telephone. I have heard a variant used, "two whoops and a holler."

Another typical folk expression, used in describing the people of the western country as they appeared to eastern Jack Ellyat, is "rough as all outdoors."[48]

Folk beliefs. Folk beliefs are traditional, untutored beliefs, arising without benefit of science and exhibiting a wide range of subject matter. They very often deal with the outgrowth of fear, superstition and credulity. Benét, since he uses folk beliefs, consequently touches frequently on the supernatural. Throughout John Brown's Body there are implications of the supernatural, such as "a graveyard night," "her ghost lived on," and "the slow voice haunting the ocean-shell."

An example, to refer again to the song of the thirteen sisters which was cited as having ballad characteristics,

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[47] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 99.

[48] Ibid., p. 100.

is found in the attention which that passage gives to the ghost. In that case the ghost is used as a personification of the institution of slavery, the "black ghost" being an omen of trouble for the sisters:

> There is a ghost, when the night is old.
> There is a ghost who walks in the cold.
> (The trees are shaking, my son.)
> . . . . . .
> But the ghost is naked and will not rest
> Until the sun rise out of the West.
> (The lightning lightens, my son.)
>
> All night long like a moving stain,
> (The trees are breaking, my son.)
> The black ghost wanders his house of pain.
> There is blood where his hand has lain.
> It is wrong he should wear a chain.
> (The sky is falling, my son.)[49]

Another phase of the supernatural is materialization of the Devil. This phenomenon ranges, at present, from actual belief to a figure of speech--usually the latter--but even as a mere expression it has its roots in what was formerly accepted as sober truth. Benét, referring to the newspaper editors, orators and others in the North who had called loudly for war, says: "They have raised the Devil with slogans and editorials, but where is the charm that will lay him? Who will bind the Devil aroused?"[50] There is a whole ritual of raising the Devil, involving charms, incantations, ceremonies or promises. It is

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[49] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[50] Ibid., p. 97.

accomplished in Benet's short story, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," through a promise by Jabez Stone--"I vow it's enough to make a man want to sell his soul to the devil! And I would, too, for two cents!"

Folk customs. To demonstrate how Benét weaves folk customs into his verse, one instance is enough--the American custom of exploding fireworks in or under containers to augment the sound or throw the container into the air. The rifle fire in the Harper's Ferry arsenal as John Brown's men are besieged is said to be "Like firecrackers set off in a stone jug,"[51] and the rifle fire at the battle of Shiloh is described in the line, "Now they were setting off firecrackers under a boiler. . . ."[52] Since the Civil War, increasing use of canned foods has made light-weight cans plentiful, and the jug in the old custom has given way to a can which may be blown high into the air.

Folk art. Folk art is not neglected by Benét in utilizing folk materials. When he goes to describe the Union, he calls it

> . . . a patchwork quilt whose patches
> Are the red-earth stuff of Georgia, the pine-bough green of Vermont.[53]

The same folk art is mentioned again in telling of the

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[51] Ibid., p. 35.

[52] Ibid., p. 110.

[53] Ibid., p. 69.

wandering families after the Civil War:

> --Dusty wagons full of chickens and children,
> Full of tools and quilts, Rising Sun and Roses of Sharon.[54]

Comparing the war itself to an iron screen, Benet says:

> Look behind it now
> At the great parti-colored quilt of these patchwork states.

Quilt-making is one of the most widespread folk arts. Even in the most unlettered sections of the country there exists a knowledge of elaborate and colorfully-named patterns of patchwork quilt construction, passed on by tradition from generation to generation. "Rising Sun" and "Rose of Sharon" are the names of two of the designs. The popularity of the latter name in folk tradition is further shown in its use by John Steinbeck in Grapes of Wrath as the name of a girl, the pronunciation being telescoped to "Rosasharon." In both cases the ultimate source of the name is Biblical. In Carl Sandburg's American Songbag the section on Kentucky folksong is entitled "Kentucky Blazing Star" which, Sandburg says, is the name of a "kiverlid" design that originated along some Kentucky mountain creek.

So much for an examination of the types of folk materials. These are sufficient to demonstrate that Benét had an awareness of such materials, their nature, types and scope. The existence of this awareness testifies to his conscious use of the folk, rather than accidental and uncontrolled use.

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[54] Ibid., p. 115.

Effectiveness of Use of Folk Materials

After it is shown that Benét expressed an intention of working in a medium of folk materials, that he chose a unifying theme from the folk consciousness, and that he demonstrated a knowledge of sources and types of such materials, one of the major questions is how well he depicted characters, types, and groups through the use of this medium.

Some of the folk materials, or effects achieved through use of the manner of folklore, do not, it is true, apply to any one individual or section of the country. In this category are the ghostly cavalry charge which Benet uses to symbolize the approaching Civil War, the references to astrology, and the allusions to folk songs in connection with the search of Melora Vilas for Jack Ellyat.

The supernatural and the astrological. Both the Connecticut boy, Jack Ellyat, and the Georgian, Clay Wingate, are made to feel the supernatural phenomenon of the horses of war racing through the upper air. To Ellyat, it seemed that

> There was a fairy hush
> Everywhere. Even the setter at his feet
> Lay there as if the twilight had bewitched
> His russet paws into two russet leaves,
> A dog of russet leaves who did not stir a hair.
>
> Then something broke the peace.
> Like wind it was, the flutter of rising wind,
> But then it grew until it was the rushing
> Of winged stallions, distant and terrible,

Trampling beyond the sky.
The hissing charge
Of lightless armies of angelic horse
Galloping down the stars.
There were no words
In that implacable and feathery thunder
And yet there must have been, or Ellyat's mind
Caught them like broken arrows out of the air.
. . . . . .
He stared at the sky, confused. It was empty and bleak.
But he still felt the shock of the hooves on his heart.
--The riderless horse never bridled or tamed--
He heard them screaming like eagles loosed from a cloud
As they drove South to trample the indolent sun,
And darkness sat in his mind like a shadow enthroned.[55]

And Clay Wingate, in Georgia, experiences something of the same:

. . . what was that noise beyond the sky,
That harry of unseen cavalry
Riding the wind?
His own horse stirred,
Neighing. He listened. There was a word.
He could not hear it--and yet he heard.
It was an arrow from ambush flung,
It was a bell with a leaden tongue
Striking an hour.
He was young
No longer. He and his horse were old,
And both were bound with an iron band.
He slipped from the saddle and tried to stand.
He struck one hand with the other hand.
But both were cold.

The horses, burning-hooved, drove on toward the sea,
But, where they passed, the air was troubled and sick
Like earth that the shoulder of earthquake heavily stirs.
There was a whisper moving that air all night,
A whisper that cried and whimpered about the house
Where John Brown prayed to his God, by his narrow bed.[56]

The omen, as it appeared to Ellyat, was of ghostly cavalry "as they drove South." As it appeared to Wingate,

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[55] Ibid., pp. 15-17.

[56] Ibid., p. 23.

the spirit-horses "drove on toward the sea." Thus, Benét makes the portent foretell not only the catastrophic conflict, but the outcome as well. The war would be carried to the South, with Federal armies marching through Georgia to the sea.

In the folk traditions of all peoples, strange sights and sounds in the air are a conventional type of omen. Portents may be in the shape which clouds assume, in the sights of a meteor or meteor shower, in an eclipse, or in a seemingly supernatural occurrence due to atmospheric conditions. Ballagh says[57] that the Nat Turner insurrection of 1831, to which Benét makes an allusion in his poem, was due to

> mental aberration of Nat which was brought to a climax by an eclipse and the consequent peculiar condition of the sun, and he 'conjured,' as the negroes say, his followers by means that readily appealed to their ignorance and superstitions, such as: 'hieroglyphics,' 'numbers,' and 'signs written in blood.'

Ballagh, dealing further with the subject of portents, quotes from the Baltimore Sun of May 13, 1899, a dispatch dated the previous day in Richmond, Virginia, to the effect that on that day, for

> several hours concentric rainbows of great brilliancy surrounded the sun. Between the luminous circles rested dense clouds, and all was bright without the outer circle. It inspired admiration in the eyes of intelligent people, but the ignorant were deeply affected with fear. . . the Rev. John Jasper (a noted

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[57] James Curtis Ballagh, A History of Slavery in Virginia (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1902), p. 94.

negro divine) whose opinions on planetary movements stand higher with them than any other authority, was asked by members of his flock to interpret the sign in the heavens. The old philosopher, now eighty-seven years old, is nearly blind with age. He listened attentively to the description of the solar halo, and after a few seconds of deep meditation, said: "It is a sign God has placed in the sky to warn the people of his wrath to come. Wickedness is increasing, and the way most people are carrying on is simply scandalous. The Bible says strange sights shall appear in the sky, and I believe this is one of them." His flock breathed easier when the sun reached the meridian and the phenomena disappeared.[58]

Another folk belief woven into the fabric of John Brown's Body, which is not used in reference to any one group or individual, is that regarding astrology. We are told:

And yet Lincoln had a star, if you will have it so--and was haunted by a prairie star.
Down in the South another man [Lee], most unlike him but as steadfast, is haunted by another star that has little to do with tinsel. . . .[59]

And, switching from the singular to the plural of celestial bodies:

. . . rough-bearded Tecumseh Sherman
Who had tried most things, being cursed with a taste
For honesty, had found small luck in his stars.[60]

Although among a large segment of the population, the once-universal belief in astrology has been reduced to a figure of speech occurring in such phrases as "my lucky

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58 Ballagh, op. cit., p. 94.

59 Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 98.

60 Ibid., p. 101.

stars," this belief probably was much stronger at the time of the Civil War. It was accepted, a few hundred years ago, as a "science." One historian describes the attitude, at the time of the first settlement of America, as follows:

> There existed a profound and general belief in astrology. Many people, including conservative scholars, believed that human affairs were determined by movements of the heavenly bodies. There was almost universal belief in the reading of horoscopes.[61]

The influence of the stars, as mentioned above, is lightly regarded by a large part of the modern population of this country, but among some groups, there is still very active belief. There is still enough faith in horoscopes to provide a sale for certain books and periodicals on the subject, and to justify publication of astrological columns in certain newspapers. Many farmers still plant by the phases of the moon. And there are miscellaneous folk beliefs still current, particularly among the untutored and among children, such as "Every time a star falls someone dies,"[62] and "When you see the first star at night, make a wish before you speak and the wish will come true."[63]

Folk use of Biblical expressions. The folk speech of America as a whole, as well as of certain groups in

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[61] Stuart G. Noble, A History of American Education (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1938), p. 9.

[62] Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, I (April, 1935), 21.

[63] Ibid., p. 26.

particular, has been influenced by Biblical passages, and this influence is reflected in Benét's diction. Two examples will suffice. In speaking of the dreary monotony of war, the poet says that still,

> . . . here and there, there were days
> . . . . . .
> When the staff struck out a spring from the stones that had long been dry.[64]

And, in speaking of modern industrial cities, Benét says they have a "pillar of smoke by day and fire by night."[65]

The first of these two references, that of water gushing forth when a stone is struck with a staff, is to the well-known episode in which Moses was directed to provide water for the thirsty Israelites:

> And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.[66]

The second reference is to a symbol of divine guidance, familiar in American folk-speech, provided for the Israelites during their wanderings after being liberated from Egypt:

> And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a

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[64] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 293.

[65] Ibid., p. 335.

[66] Exodus (Authorized Version) 17:5-6.

pillar of fire, to give them light;
He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.[67]

The song as an expreasion of folk culture. In addition to using the folk song in connection with various individuals, classes and sections, Benét makes a major use of it in describing the wanderings of John Vilas and his daughter, Melora, in search of Jack Ellyat after the war--an application which necessarily applies to so many parts of the country that it may be considered general. This is as it should be, for folk songs, both those brought originally from England and Scotland, and those made in America, play a part in the folklore of all sections of the United States. Melora's search, the poem relates, continued

Until she too grew fabulous as a song
Sung to a beechwood fiddle, and all the old
Barely-recorded chants that are the land
And no one poet's or musician's
--"Old Dan Tucker," "The Belle of Albany,"
The girl who died for love in the high woods
And cruel Barbara Allen in her pride.

So she became a concertina tune.
Played in plank taverns by a blind, old man,
A jew's-harp strain, a comb-and-banjo song,
The music of a soapbox violin
Shrilled out against the tree-toads and the crickets
Through the hot nights of June. So, though she passed
Unknowing, yet she left the legend-touch
Bright as a splash of sumach still behind
Wherever the gaunt horse pulled on his load.
Till, later, those who knew no more of her
Living, than they might know of such removed
And singable creations as "Lord Randall,"

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[67] Ibid., 13:21-22.

"Colombo," "Little Musgrave," or "Jay Gould's Daughter"
Yet knew enough of her to sing about
And fit her name, Melora, to the same
Slow-dropping minor of the water and earth--
The minor of the country barber-shops
That keens above the grave of Jesse James
And the lone prairie where the cowboy died,
The desolate minor of the jail-bird's song,
Luscious with sorrow, and the minor notes
That tell about the tragic end of such
As loved too well to have such cruel fathers
But were so loving, even in the dust,
A red-rose brier grew out of their dead hearts
And twined together in a lover's knot
For all the county people to admire,
And every lost, waif ballad we have made
And, making, scorned because it smelt of the earth,
And now would seek, but cannot make again--
So she became a legend and a name.[68]

This passage is rich, not only in allusions to specific songs and ballads, but also in allusions to the characteristics of folk songs. It makes repeated reference to the minor key of such songs, to the fiddle accompaniment which often is a distinctive feature, and to the now-outmoded institution of barber-shop singing. The persons who came into contact with Vilas' daughter "knew enough of her to sing about / And fit her name, Melora, to the same / Slow-dropping minor" of other folk songs. The substitution of words and tunes is frequently noted by folk song collectors.

The passage also mentions characteristics which have to do with recurrent themes or conventional situations or episodes. Allusion is made to the "jail-bird's song." This constitutes a whole category of American songs. Typical

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[68] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 296-297.

are "Birmingham Jail," (which also has appeared with some changes under the title of "Shreveport Jail" and "Down in the Valley"), and "The Boston Burglar," of which one stanza is quoted to show a trend of thought commonly indulged in by imprisoned song-makers:

> Come all you jolly fellows, a warning take of me,
> And never go night-walking and shun bad company,
> For if you do, you'll surely rue, and you'll be sent like me,
> For robbing of the Boston bank to the penitentiary.[69]

"The tragic end of such as loved too well to have such cruel fathers" is found in a number of English and Scottish ballads current in the United States. In "The Soldier," for example,

> "Now," said the lady, "I cannot be your wife,
> For fear my wretched father would shortly end your life."[70]

Such ballads often related some symbolic event which immortalized the constancy of the lovers. One such symbol was the growth from their graves of "a red-rose brier," as Benét puts it, which "twined together in a lover's knot," In an American variation of "Lord Lovell," known in this particular version by the title of "Lord Lover," it happens this way:

> Lady Nancy was buried in the cold church ground,
> Lord Lover was buried close by her;
> And out of her bosom there grew a rose,
> And out of Lord Lover's a briar.

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[69] Pound, op. cit., p. 57.

[70] Ibid., p. 27.

They grew and they grew to the steeple high,
Till they could grow no higher.
And there they tied in a true lover's knot
For all true lovers to admire.[71]

Of the ballads and songs to which allusion is made specifically in the passage quoted from John Brown's Body, some are appropriate as a comparison to the almost-hopeless search which Melora was making, in the sense that they treated of love or sorrow. Among them is "Jesse James" with the refrain mentioning the bereaved widow and children. The version in Pound's collection is:

Jesse leaves a widow to mourn all her life,
The children he left will pray
For the thief and the coward
Who shot Mr. Howard
And laid Jesse James in his grave.[72]

The theme of hopeless love which has victimized Melora finds an echo in "Barbara Allen." As sung in one American version (in which Sweet William becomes Little Jimmy Grooves),

It was early in the month of May
The rosebuds they were swelling;
Little Jimmy Grooves on his deathbed lay
For the love of Barbery Allen.[73]

Those who heard Melora's tale might well imagine that Jack Ellyat had been unfaithful to her. Faithless love is the theme of one of the ballads named, "Little Musgrave," although it is the woman who is faithless. In a variation of this ballad sung in 1916 by Mrs. Jane Gentry of Hot

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[71] Ibid., p. 6.
[72] Ibid., p. 64.
[73] Ibid., p. 7.

Springs, North Carolina (Little Musgrave being transformed into Little Matthy Groves),

> The first come down was a raven white,
> And the next come down was a polly,
> And the next come down was Lord Thomas's wife,
> And she was the fairest of them all, all,
> And she was the fairest of them all.
>
> Little Matthy Groves was a-standing by;
> She placed her eyes on him,
> Saying, "You're the darling of my heart
> And the darling of my life."[74]

Also in keeping with Melora's sorrow, in its general air of mournfulness, is "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie":

> "O bury me not on the lone prairie,"
> These words came slowly and mournfully
> From the pallid lips of a youth who lay
> On his cold damp bed at the close of day.[75]

Less appropriate to the situation in which these songs are brought to mind is the rollicking "Old Dan Tucker," which history credits to the authorship of Daniel D. Emmett but which in folk use has lost all trace of its origin, of written transmission, and to a great extent of its original words. The first verse and chorus as Emmett wrote them:

> I came to town de udder night
> I hear de noise, den see de sight;
> De watchmen dey (was) runnin' roun',
> Cryin' "Ole Dan Tucker's come to town."
>
> Git outen de way, git outen de way
> Git outen de way, Ole Dan Tucker
> You's too late to come to your supper.[76]

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[74] Ibid., p. 37.

[75] Ibid., p. 253.

[76] Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 761.

No more appropriate is the hoboes' cynical song, "Jay Gould's Daughter":

> Jay Gould's daughter said before she died,
> "Father, fix the blind so the bums' can't ride;
> If ride they must, let them ride the rod,
> Let them put their trust in the hands of God,
> In the hands of God, in the hands of God,
> Let 'em put their trust in the hands of God.[77]

It should be noted that in references to folk songs in this particular passage, Benét is addressing the modern reader, recalling songs with which he may be familiar. He is not listing the titles as being in the minds of those who made a legend of Melora. This distinction is relevant when it is considered that some of the folk songs grew up after the Civil War period. "Jesse James" necessarily belongs, through its biographical connotations, to a somewhat later period, and it is equally obvious that "Jay Gould's Daughter" because of its nature must have come onto the scene later. And "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," derived from a once-popular song, "Ocean Burial," dates from 1872, with H. Clemons of Deadwood, South Dakota, being the adapter, according to N. H. Thorpe in his Songs of the Cowboys.[78]

Symbolism. Before taking up the use of folk materials as they are used in connection with specific individuals

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[77] Sandburg, An American Songbag, p. 364.

[78] Pound, op. cit., p. 253.

and groups, we may take note here of one interesting bit of symbolism which apparently has its roots in folk belief or tale. It has defied all efforts made in research for this thesis to identify the original or any exact parallel, although Benét, in placing it within quotation marks, seems to be indicating a traditional source. Melora, feeling the full tide of her first love for Jack Ellyat,

. . . passed her narrow hands
Over her body once, half-wonderingly.

"Divide this transitory and temporal flesh
Into twelve ears of red and yellow corn
And plant each ear beside a different stream.
Yet, in the summer, when the harvesters
Come with their carts, the grain shall change again
And turn into a woman's body again
And walk across a heap of sickle blades
To find the naked body of its love."[79]

And Melora, after her child is born, soliloquizes:

"Divide anew this once-divided flesh
Into twelve shares of mercy and on each
Bestow a fair and succorable child,
Yet, in full summer, when the ripened stalks
Blow in the wind, like golden-headed men,
Under the sun, the shares will reunite
Into unmerciful and childless love."[80]

Longfellow, in his Hiawatha, uses an Indian legend of a warrior who, after being slain and buried, sprang up from the grave in the form of corn, providing food for his race. This, however, offers too few points of similarity. The

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[79] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 127.

[80] Ibid., pp. 269-270.

sense of symbolism in this passage is heightened by the use of the number twelve, always regarded in folk usage as being a mystical number. It is interesting to note, also, in connection with the corn and mystic number symbolism that certain types of Indian corn have twelve rows. (Others have eight rows.)[81]

Another superstitious folk practice which may range from symbolism down to actual belief is mentioned in connection with the birth of Melora's child. The girl says to herself:

> I will not ask for wheel and thread
> To spin the labor plain,
> Or the scissors hidden under the bed
> To cut the bearing pain.[82]

Characterization of John Brown. Turning to the figure who provides the unifying theme in the poem, we find John Brown depicted, so far as folk materials are used, in Biblical terms. This manner of characterization is in keeping with the man himself. His militant attitude, disdainful of the laws of mere man, is reflected when Benét has him say:

> And Joshua's sword is on the wall
> With space beside for mine.

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[81] Craigie, William A., and Hulbert, James R., editors, A Dictionary of American English, 10 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938-1944).

[82] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 205. The same superstition regarding scissors was used later by John Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath.

And should the Philistine defend
His strength against our blows. . . .[83]

Furthermore, in the ecstasy of his prayer for the success of his Harper's Ferry venture, Brown in the poem has a vision which is apocalyptic both in spirit and in phrasing. It is almost like a passage from the Revelation of St. John:

I hear the rolling of the wheels,
The chariots of war!
I hear the breaking of the seals
And the opening of the door!

The glorious beasts with many eyes
Exult before the Crowned.
The buried saints arise, arise
Like incense from the ground!
. . . . . .
Oh, fairer than the bugle call
Its walls of jasper shine![84]

Even Brown's last thought before the trap fell at his execution, in Benét's conception of the man, was the line almost verbatim from the Psalmist:

"I shall look unto the hills whence cometh my help."[85]

Negro characterization. In any poem of this magnitude, based on the Civil War and accepting as its controlling theme the abolition spirit, the Negro must play a major role. Benét has devoted many pages to portraying the black man, and hardly a line is untouched by the homely, folk materials so typical of that retarded race. Logically, much of this material is Biblical, reflecting the lore which

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[83] Ibid., p. 25.
[84] Ibid., pp. 24-25.
[85] Ibid., p. 52.

the Negroes heard from their masters and from their own literate preachers, and which became a part of their songs and their everyday expressions. The escaping slave, Spade, fights the river current:

> "We'se done our best, but she fights like a angel would
> Like wrestlin' with a death-angel."
> . . . . . .
> --He had been fighting an angel for seven nights
> And now he hung by his hands to the angel's neck,
> Lost in an iron darkness of beating wings.
> If he once let go, the angel would push him off
> And touch him across the loins with a stony hand
> In the last death trick of the wrestle.[86]

The wrestling with an angel is, of course, a counterpart of the Jewish patriarch Jacob's encounter with a supernatural being, even down to the detail of striking the thigh to cripple:

> And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.
> And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.[87]

Even in expressions of love, the Negro's speech in John Brown's Body is flavored with Biblical expressions:

> ". . . I loves you, woman,
> Till I feels like Meshuck down in de fiery furnace. . ."[88]

"Meshuck" is a folk corruption of the name Meshach: "And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down

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[86] Ibid., p. 197.

[87] Genesis (Authorized Version) 32:24-25.

[88] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 67.

the Negroes heard from their masters and from their own illiterate preachers, and which brings a part of their songs and their everyday expressions. The searching slave, Grace, fights the river current:

"We've done our best, but she slipped like a angel would like wrestlin' with a death-angel."

. . . . . .

--He had been fighting an angel for seven nights
And now he hung by his hands to the angel's neck,
Lost in an iron darkness of pulsing wings.
If he once let go, the angel would wash him off
And toss him across the Jordan with a stony hand
In the last death-tick of the wrestle.[85]

The wrestling with an angel is, of course, a commonplace of the Jewish patriarch Jacob's encounter with a supernatural being, even down to the detail of crippling the thigh to cripple:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.
And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.[86]

Even in expressions of love, the Negro's speech in John Henry's Body is flavored with biblical expressions:

. . . I love you, woman,
Till I feels like Moshuah down in de Fiery Furnace.[87]

"Moshuah" is a folk corruption of the name Meshach. "And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell down

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[85] Ibid., p. 197.

[86] Genesis (Authorized Version) 32:24-25.

[87] Hayes, John Henry Body, p. 67.

bound into the midst of the fiery furnace."[89]

In the desire for freedom, what more natural than that the Negro should compare himself to the Israelites in bondage in Egypt? Benét has the slave say:

> And I hears de chariot-wheels an' de Jordan River,
> Rollin' and rollin' and rollin' thu' my sleep,
> And I wants to be free. I wants to see my chillun
> Growin' up free, and all bust out of Egypt.[90]

The religious element, with allusions to Moses and Aaron who led Israel out of captivity, is found in the song of the slave which Benét creates:

> Oh Lordy Je-sus
> Won't you come and find me?
> They put me in jail, Lord,
> Way down in jail.
> Won't you send me a prophet
> Just one of your prophets
> Like Moses and Aaron
> To get me some bail?
>
> I'm feeling poorly
> Yes, mighty poorly,
> I ain't got no strength, Lord,
> I'm all trampled down.
> So send me an angel
> Just any old angel
> To give me a robe, Lord,
> And give me a crown.
>
> Oh, Lordy Je-sus
> It's a long time comin'
> It's a long time co-o-min'
> That Jubilee time.
> We'll wait and we'll pray, Lord,
> We'll wait and we'll pray, Lord,
> But it's a long time, Lord,
> Yes, it's a long time.[91]

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[89] Daniel (Authorized Version) 3:23.

[90] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 69.

[91] Ibid., p. 13.

As if in direct answer to this plea is the invocation to the spirit of John Brown, which gradually takes on the tone of the Negro spiritual, including the Biblical allusions:

> . . . under the giant blossoms lies Egypt's land,
> The dark river,
> The ground of bondage,
> The chained men.
> . . . . . .
> Rise up, John Brown,
> (A-mouldering in the grave.)
> Go down, John Brown,
> Go down, John Brown,
> Go down, John Brown, and set that people free![92]

The model for this is the spiritual, "Go Down, Moses":

> Go down, Moses
> 'Way down in Egypt land.
> Tell ole Pharaoh
> To let my people go.[93]

In using folk materials to portray the Negro, Benét does not, of course, limit himself to the Biblical. He creates songs typical of other Negro folk songs, even though in such cases it is likely that there will be religious overtones. One of these is based on the well-known "Year of Jubilee," by Henry Clay Work, a song which might have been supposed to be somewhat offensive to the white people of the South but which, strangely enough, became more popular with them than it did with the people of the North.[94] A typical verse of Benét's version:

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[92] Ibid., p. 184.

[93] Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 727.

[94] Stevenson, op. cit., p. 696.

Massa was de whale wid de big inside,
Jubili, Jubilo!
Massa was de lion and de lion's hide.
But de whale unswallered, and de lion died!
Hit's de year of Jublio![95]

This has the feel of a genuine folk song to a much greater extent than does the original. Benét uses not only Biblical allusions, but also such typical Negro expressions throughout as "snatched bald-headed," and "hit don't matter if you pine and ail." Work's song, with its "Say, darkeys," and its laughing chorus, is in the spirit of the old time minstrel. The first verse and chorus are:

Say, darkeys, hab you seen de massa,
Wid de muffstash on he face,
Go long de road some time dis mornin',
Like he gwine to leabe de place?
He see de smoke way up de ribber
Whar de Lincum gunboats lay;
He took he hat an' leff berry sudden,
An' I spose he's runned away.

De massa run, ha, ha!
De darkey stay, ho, ho!
It mus' be now de Kingdum comin',
An' de yar ob jubilo.[96]

Prominent among the devices used in making the Negro live in these pages is superstition:

. . . the slow-burning pine-knots
Danced ghosts and witches over the low, near ceiling,
. . . . . .
Squinch-owl carry yo' talk to de paterollers,
. . . . . .

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[95] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 304.

[96] Stevenson, op. cit., p. 522.

Can't you hear dat feelin' I got, woman?[97]

The runaway slave, Spade,

> . . . meant to kill Zachary first, but the signs weren't right.
> He talked to the knife but the knife didn't sweat or heat.
> So he just got away, instead.[98]

Almost immediately after his escape, Spade encountered another omen:

> The rabbit ran past.
> He stared at it for a moment with wild, round eyes,
> Started to yell of laughter--and choked it off.
> "Dat aint no nachul rabbit dere, Spade, boy.
> Dat's a sign. Yes, suh. You better start makin' tracks.
> Take your foot in your hand, Mistuh Spade."[99]

The belief that rabbits are closely connected with luck is common. Probably everyone is familiar with the practice of carrying a rabbit's foot for luck--and if it is the left hind foot of a rabbit killed in a graveyard, so much the better. The superstition which Spade exhibits here, however, is closely akin to another belief, one found, among other places, in Tennessee, where it is said that it is bad luck for a rabbit to cross the road in front of a person.[100]

Another superstition prevalent among illiterate

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[97] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 67.

[98] Ibid., p. 150.

[99] Ibid., p. 151.

[100] W. Aldelbert Redfield, "Superstitions and Folk Beliefs," Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, III (April, 1937), 31.

Negroes is belief in the ability to "conjure" a person, to his harm, through certain magical practices. Counter-magic was supposed to overcome the designs of the original conjurer. Thus, Cudjo, faithful servant of the Wingate family in Georgia, is dismayed at the plight of his white folks and the South during the Civil War, and says:

> Somethin's conjured dis white-folks South.
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . I done my bes',
> Scattered de fedders and burnt de nes',
> Filled de bottle and made de hand
> And buried de trick in Baptis' land,
> An' dat trick's so strong, I was skeered all night,
> But, somehow or udder, it don' wuhk right.
> Ef I got me a piece of squinch-owl's tail
> An' some dead-folks yearth fum de county jail,
> It mout wuhk better--but I ain't sho',
> . . . . . .
> War was a throat that swallowed things
> And you couldn't cure it with conjurings.[101]

Cudjo, after burying the Wingate family silver to keep it from falling into the hands of Sherman's men, is obsessed by a superstitious fear that the silver, possessed of an unnatural power, will rise of its own accord from the ground and return to the house where it had been for generations. He also could imagine that the ghost of Elspeth Mackay, one of the Wingate ancestors, would return to look for the silver which has been removed from its rightful place:

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[101] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 216.

"Got to hide it, so we tried,
But silver like dat don't like to hide,
Silver's ust to be passed aroun'
Don't like lyin' in lonesome groun',
Wants to come back to de Hall, all right.
Silver, I always shone you bright,
You could see yo'self in de shine--
Silver, it wasn't no fix of mine!
Don't you come projeckin' after me!"

His eyes were shut but he still could see
The slow chests rising out of the ground
With an ominous clatter of silver sound,
The locks undoing, the bags unfastening,
And every knife and platter and spoon
Clinking out of the grave and hastening
Back to the Hall, in the witches' moon;
And the wind in the chimney played such tricks
That it was no wind, be it soft or loud,
But Elspeth seeking her candlesticks
All night long in her ruffled shroud,
. . . . . .
Cudjo heard it, and Cudjo shook,
And Cudjo felt for the Holy Book. . . .[102]

Superstition is also evident in the description of Cudjo, when it is said,

And even his master could not find
The secret place in the back of his mind
Where witch-bones talked to a scarlet rag
And a child's voice spoke from a conjur-bag.[103]

And in referring to John Brown, it is Cudjo's opinion that

He's friends with de ha'nts and steel won't touch him
But the paterollers is sure to cotch him.[104]

The statement that "steel won't touch him" may be obscure until one remembers the old superstition that supernatural

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[102] Ibid., p. 310.

[103] Ibid., p. 36.

[104] Ibid., p. 40.

beings such as witches cannot be killed with ordinary bullets, but are vulnerable only to silver bullets. Daphne Harris, using "folk elements drawn from the observation. . . of beliefs and customs in East Tennessee communities" has written a story, "The Silver Bullet," in which she has a white character, Aunt Melissy, say, "But I knowed, an' I tole ye, that it 'ud take a silver bullit t' kill a witch. A reg'lar bullit won't do nothin'."[105]

A whole dialect of folk expressions characterizes Negro speech, and Benét makes use of it in treatment of the Negroes in his cast. Some examples are found in the musings of Cudjo: ". . . the Quality. . . his white folks. . . a talkin' eye. . . trashy high yaller."[106] As the war causes the economic condition of the South to deteriorate, Cudjo says, "But now we'se rowin' up Hard Times Creek," and "dat wind aches like a motherless chile."[107] The two expressions are directly out of folk speech. The second of them is peculiarly Negro, being widely used instead of the more formal "orphan." One Negro spiritual laments, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile."

The manner in which Negro folk speech is permeated

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[105] Daphne Harris, "The Silver Bullet," Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, III (September, 1937), 70.

[106] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 35-40.

[107] Ibid., p. 216.

by Biblical expressions is recognized in such passages as that in which the Wingate slave says:

> "But I sees 'em all, jus' goin' and goin'
> Goin' to war like Joshua, goin' like David."[108]

This passage echoes the impression which Joshua has made upon Negro folk consciousness, an impression which is seen in the spiritual:

> Joshua fit de battle of Jerico--Jerico--Jerico--
> Joshua fit de battle of Jerico
> And de walls came a-tumblin' down.[109]

A further example of the same tendency is the Negro slave woman's advice to her husband: "You got no call to be thinkin'."[110] Folk use of this expression is so deeply rooted that most of those who habitually use it do not stop to reflect that it comes from the Biblical accounts of Old Testament prophets who were "called" divinely to their spiritual tasks.

Illustrative of the way Negro speech is filled with the supernatural, the Biblical, and the marvellous, is the portrayal of the uncertainties of the slave during the war:

> The slaves in the quarters are buzzing and talking.
> --All through the winter the ha'nts went walking,
> Ha'nts the size of a horse or bigger,
> Ghost-patrollers, scaring a nigger.
> . . . . . .
> Old Marse Billy's a-comin' home!
> He's slew a brigade with a ha'nt's jaw-bone.
> . . . . . .

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[108] Ibid., p. 68.

[109] Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 727.

[110] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 67.

The little black children with velvet eyes
Tell each other tremendous lies.
They play at Manassas. . .
. . . . . .
. . . scare themselves pretending to die.[111]

A folk custom which distinguishes the southern American Negro, and which persists even to the present, is the Negro desire to dis-associate himself from what he conceives to be strictly white affairs. Gudjo is made to reflect this attitude in his distaste for John Brown's raid:

"How come he want to kick up such a dizziness?[112]
Nigger-business ain't white-folks' business."

Spade, the escaped slave, feels the same detachment from the ideological and physical combat of Northern and Southern whites, when he learns that the Federal government is conscripting Negroes:

"Dey kain't enlist me," said Spade.
"I ain't honin' to go an' fight in no white-folks' war."[113]

Turning from the Negro to the Southern whites, let us see what use has been made of folk materials to portray more accurately and vividly this portion of the cast of characters in John Brown's Body.

Portrayal of the South. Quite understandably, supernatural materials have been woven into portrayal of the South and its people, a South whose upper classes were

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[111] Ibid., p. 137.

[112] Ibid., p. 40.

[113] Ibid., p. 202.

nursed on romanticism and whose lower classes remained in superstition through the lack of educational opportunities. Typical of this element of supernaturalism, we find in the description of John Brown's raid a suggestion that the leader of a slave insurrection, executed twenty-eight years earlier, had returned to life to free the slave and murder the master:

> . . . wild news
> Of abolition devils sprung from the ground
> A hundred and fifty, three hundred, a thousand strong
> To pillage Harper's Ferry, with fire and sword.
> Meanwhile the whole countryside was springing to arms.
> The alarm-bell in Charlestown clanged "Nat Turner has come.
> Nat Turner has come again, all smoky from Hell,
> Setting the slave to murder and massacre!"[114]

Nat Turner was a Negro preacher who, with twelve of his followers, suffered the death penalty in Southampton, Virginia, for leading a slave uprising in 1831. One authority says:

> [Turner]. . . was looked upon from early childhood as a prophet by his kindred, and by flattery, omens and misconceptions of Scripture was brought to a fanatical state of mind in which he supposed he was called upon to deliver his race from bondage. . . the band rapidly grew by impressment as the raiders advanced, or as runaways joined it, to twenty negroes, and, finally, to forty. They seized horses and arms at the various places visited, and from Sunday night, to noon of the following day they terrorized without serious opposition the whole country side. The most cruel murders, of men, women, and children were committed in their rapid house-to-house advance toward the county seat. . . . Some sixty persons were killed. . . the whites quickly raised a sufficient force to check the advance and

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[114] Ibid., p. 28.

prevent the escape of the negroes to the Dismal Swamp. Most of the raiders, including Nat, were finally captured.[115]

That was one shade evoked from the hereafter. In picturing the Confederate army, Benét brought whole brigades back from the shadows:

> Call the shapes from the mist,
> Call the dead men out of the mist and watch them ride.
> . . . . . .
> Now the phantom guns creak by. They are Pelham's guns.
> . . . . . .
> Yellow-haired Hood. . .
> . . . could lead forlorn hopes with the ghost of Ney.
> His big-boned Texans follow him into the mist.
> . . . . . .
> Now [Lee] rides Traveller back into the mist.[116]

In a digression from the general picture of a ghost procession of Confederate leaders and armies, Benét says of Traveller,

> They brod such horses in Virginia then.
> Horses that were remembered after death
> And buried not so far from Christian ground
> That if their sleeping riders should arise
> They could not witch them from the earth again,
> And ride a printless course along the grass.[117]

The allusion is to the old superstitious custom of burying with or near a man the things his spirit will need in the next world. Once carried to the point of putting horses, arms, money and food into the grave, the custom now has dwindled to the placing of flowers on the grave. However, in the period described--the Civil War era--it was

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[115] Ballagh, op. cit., p. 93.

[116] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 168-175.

[117] Ibid., p. 170.

doubtlessly known to the people who buried their horses "not so far from Christian ground" that the western Indians still interred bows, arrows and other objects with their red warriors. Even at the present time, the oriental races living in the American territory of Hawaii place food on the graves of their dead. I have observed in particular the frequent placing of plates of fruit on such graves.

Omens also come into the Southern picture. As British politicians wait for a definite "omen" in the war before they decide whether Britain will recognize the Confederacy, they reject the outcome of the battle of Chancellorsville as not being decisive:

> The watchers stare at the board
> Waiting a surer omen than Chancellorsville
> Or any battle won on a Southern ground.[118]

Similarly, Southerners desperately holding out at Vicksburg look for some sign of relief:

> The defenders of besieged Vicksburg watch, but
> Still no sight in the sky when the morning breaks.[119]

Among the folk beliefs depicted, one of the more interesting is in the lines:

> One day [Benjamin P. Judah] is there and smiling.
> The next day he is gone as if he had taken fernseed
> And walked invisible so through the Union lines.[120]

The seed of certain kinds of fern is so small as to be almost

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[118] Ibid., p. 249.

[119] Ibid., p. 249.

[120] Ibid., p. 323.

invisible, hence was believed formerly to confer invisibility on those who carried it.[121] This was part of a superstition that plants had properties indicated by their appearance. At the time America was first settled,

> leading scholars thought nature marked plants with 'signatures'. . . . The shape of the kidney bean was thought to suggest its value in the treatment of kidney diseases. In like manner, the bark of the pine tree was thought to be good for the skin, and the pit of the Carolina haw, good for 'the stone, gravel and dropsy.'[122]

The belief in the peculiar property of the fern seed goes back at least as far as Elizabethan times, when Shakespeare wrote: "We have the receipt of fern seed, we walk invisible."[123]

A means of characterizing the South which Benét uses is that of attributing to it the foods typical of the section. So, he has the captured Bailey, facing the certainty of a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp, complain of the probable food,

> He spat in the road. "It won't be good grub," he said. "Bacon and hominy grits. They don't eat right. They don't eat nothing but bacon and hominy grits!"[124]

Also, the runaway Negro slave Spade, reflecting not so much

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[121] Brewer, op. cit., p. 455.

[122] Noble, op. cit., p. 10.

[123] Henry IV, iv. 4.

[124] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 196.

the tastes of his race as those of his section, whites included, looks dismayed at the river-barrier to his freedom and says:

> "But how we gwine swim it without a good meal?
> I wisht we had even a spoonful of good hot pot-licker
> Or a smidgin of barbecued shote."[125]

In folk-songs and sayings themselves, the folk custom of adherence to foods of local or sectional preference is given recognition. In a folk-song sung for recording by Walter Williamson, a Negro shoe-shine boy in Walnut Cove, North Carolina, one stanza goes:

> Hambone is sweet
> Possum meat is good,
> Bacon meat is very, very fine.
> But give me, oh give me,
> I really wish you would
> A piece of dat watermelon
> Smilin' on the vine.[126]

Those are customs of cuisine. A Southern custom of quite different nature is illustrated when the Wingate slave, old Cudjo, says:

> "Christmas a-comin', sure and swif'
> But no use hollerin' 'Christmas Gif'!"[127]

This refers to a custom, of whites as well as Negroes, of greeting members of the family and friends on Christmas

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[125] Ibid., p. 196.

[126] E. C. Kirkland, "Collecting Ballads and Folk Songs in Tennessee," Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, II (March, 1936), 10.

[127] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 214.

morning with the words, "Christmas gift!" The first to speak them is supposed to receive a gift from the other, although the custom is largely a form, and the gift-giving does not actually take place unless it had been intended anyway.

A folk art, probably prevalent among some classes before the Civil War, but forced on the well-to-do Southerners during the conflict because of the difficulty of importing cloth already woven and dyed, was that of dyeing. So Sally Dupre engages in that art, and Benét's lines describe the source of the home-made dyes:

> She thought to herself,
> "I have stained my arms with new colors, doing this work,
> The red is pokeberry juice, the grey is green myrtle,
> The deep black is queen's delight. . . ."[128]

The South, as well as the North, was a singing people, abounding with patriotic songs during the War. Lucy Weatherby reflected on the fighting at Chancellorsville, and

> She hummed a moment
> "That's Stonewall Jackson's Way" in her clear cool voice.[129]

The title is that of a song which William Gilmore Simms is quoted as saying was found on the battlefield. The story was that the song, stained with blood, was in the breast of a soldier of the old Stonewall Brigade, killed in one of

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128 Ibid., p. 217.

129 Ibid., p. 243.

Jackson's battles in the Shenandoah Valley. The author, unknown for a quarter of a century, was later said to have been John Williamson Palmer.[130] A typical stanza:

> He's in the saddle now. Fall in!
> Steady! the whole brigade!
> Hill's at the ford, cut off; we'll win
> His way out, ball and blade!
> What matter if our shoes are worn?
> What matter if our feet are torn?
> "Quick step! we're with him before morn!"
> That's Stonewall jackson's way.[131]

And, after the Peninsula campaign of McClellan has failed,

> The honeysuckle and the eglantine
> Blow on their tiny trumpets,
> Blow out "Dixie,"
> Blow out "Lorena," blow the "Bonnie Blue Flag."[132]

The last-named of these songs, by Annie Chalmers Ketchum, was formal and literary in language, popular in use and transmission. Like many other war songs, other words were written to the tune. One version, glorifying the spirit of Southern women, declared:

> Hurrah! for the homespun dress
> That Southern ladies wear.

A stanza will show the nature of the original version:

> Now Georgia marches to the front,
> And close beside her come
> Her sisters by the Mexique Sea,
> With pealing trump and drum;
> Till answering back from hill and glen

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130 Stevenson, op. cit., p. 694.

131 Ibid., p. 483.

132 Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 180.

The rallying cry afar,
A Nation hoists the Bonnie Blue Flag
That bears a single star.[133]

Patriotic songs were not, of course, the sole musical diet of Southern people during the war. There were songs of love and sentiment in the folk use of that day. The army

Swore and laughed and despaired and sang "Lorena,"
Suffered, died, deserted, fought to the end.
Sentimental army, touched by "Lorena,"
Touched by all lace-paper-valentintines of sentiment,
Who wept for the mocking-bird on Hallie's grave
When you had better cause to weep for more private griefs,
Touched by women and your tradition-idea of them,
The old, book-fed, half-queen, half-servant idea,
False and true and expiring.[134]

The allusion to Hallie's grave is in reference to the folk song, "Listen to the Mocking Bird."

Southern individuals. Not all the folk materials used to portray Southerners is of the native variety. Lee's aide-de-camp resorts to classical mythology to compare the general with

Big Agamemnon with his curly beard,
Achilles in the cruelty of his youth,
And Oedipus before he tore his eyes.

I'd like to see him in that chariot rank,
With Traveller pulling at the leader-pole.[135]

A touch of the folk belief relative to visible spirits or souls is used to portray Stonewall Jackson's feelings at the execution of John Brown:

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[133] Stevenson, op. cit., p. 413.

[134] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 166.

[135] Ibid., p. 292.

He saw John Brown
A tiny blackened scrap of paper-soul
Fluttering above the Pit. . . .[136]

Primitive (and not so primitive) myths have described the soul as something visible but small. Elsewhere in Stephen Vincent Benét's writings this folk belief is used again. In the story, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," souls are represented as fluttering about, moth-like, small and white. An instance of the "visible soul" superstition is found in the description of East Tennessee beliefs by a modern folklorist:

> It was related that at the death of Joe Clark those watching by the bedside saw a pale flickering light appear upon one of the bed posts where it sat for a full minute or more just at the moment of his passing.[137]

Jackson is depicted, correctly enough, as a grimly righteous Protestant. So, quite appropriately, he is made to watch the execution of John Brown with a sense of divine justice sternly administered. He

> . . . heard the just implacable Voice speak out
> "Depart ye wicked to eternal fire."[138]

Possibly no part of the Bible has entered the folk consciousness and the folk speech of the Southern white Fundamentalist so vividly as has the "fire and brimstone" which are regarded as the punishment of the wicked.

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[136] Ibid., p. 52.

[137] L. L. McDowell, "A Background of Folklore," Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, II (February, 1936), p. 5.

[138] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 52.

Much of the poem depicts Clay Wingate and his family. Folk expressions are used to advantage, as when, the war nearing its end and cavalry mounts not of the best,

> Wingate wearily tried to goad
> A bag of bones on a muddy road.[139]

Something tells Wingate he should "Touch the walls of your house for luck,"[140] apparently the same superstition which leads persons to touch or knock wood to avert bad luck, particularly after boasting or expressing hope or confidence. His mother, Mary Lou Wingate, seemingly shares the superstition, for

> She struck her hand on the bedstead head,
> "They won't drive me from my house," she said,
> As the wood rang under her wedding ring.[141]

Wingate regards his home with a spirit of mysticism that verges on the supernatural, typical of folk imagination:

> So Wingate found it, riding at ease,
> The cloud-edge lifting over the trees,
> A white-sail glimmer beyond the rise,
> A sugar-castle that strained the eyes,
> Then mounting, mounting, the shining spectre
> Risen at last from the drop of nectar,
> The cloud expanding, the topsail swelling,
> The doll's house grown to a giant's dwelling,
> Porches and gardens and ells and wings
> Linking together like puzzle-rings,
> Till the parts dissolved in a steadfast whole,
> And Wingate saw it, body and soul.

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[139] Ibid., p. 316.

[140] Ibid., p. 143.

[141] Ibid., p. 309.

Saw it completely, and saw it gleam,
The full-rigged vessel, the sailing dream,
The brick and stone that were somehow quick
With a ghost not native to stone and brick,
The name held high and the gift passed on
From Wingate father to Wingate son,
No longer a house but a conjur-stone
That could hate and sorrow and hold its own. . . .[142]

Clay's devotion to house, family and tradition is such that Sally Dupre sees it as an obstacle which must be crushed before there is a clear road to their happiness together:

But Wingate Hall must tumble down,
Tumble down, tumble down,
A thing dissolving, a ruined thing,
Before we can melt from the shattered crown
Gold enough for a wedding ring.
. . . . . .
We are linked together for good an all,
For the still pool and the waterfall,
But you are married to Wingate Hall.
And Wingate Hall must tumble down,
Tumble down, tumble down,
An idol broken apart,
Before I sew on a wedding gown
And stitch my name in your heart.[143]

The effectiveness of this passage is secured by borrowing its form directly from an old, popular nursery rhyme, "London Bridge is Falling Down."

The light-hearted Georgian, Wainscott Bristol, is made to use an expression which is folk in that it, also, is derived from an old nursery rhyme. With irony, he says:

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[142] Ibid., p. 142.

[143] Ibid., pp. 147-148.

We had rations and new recruits,
Uniforms and cavalry boots,
Must have mislaid, for we can't find 'em.
They all went home with their tails behind 'em.[144]

The last line, of course, takes its form from the verse,

Little Bopeep has lost her sheep
And don't know where to find them.
Leave them alone and they'll come home
Dragging their tails behind them.

The same Bristol, awaiting the attack of a superior northern force, says with the lightness of affected unconcern, "Boys, we're booked for the shivaree."[145] He uses the popular American pronunciation of charivari, which is a folk custom in some sections of the United States. On a night shortly after a wedding, a crowd of friends assemble outside the home of the newlyweds and produce a discordant uproar with gongs, tubs, and all manner of improvised instruments, until they are admitted and served refreshments. In Bristol's speech, of course, the word is used in a figurative sense meaning assault by a military force.

The Southern girl, Lucy Weatherby, in a fervor of patriotic--and social--activity,

. . . sent white feathers to boys who didn't enlist
And bunches of flowers to boys who were suitably wounded.[146]

"The white feather" is a folk expression, signifying cowardice.

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[144] Ibid., p. 318.

[145] Ibid., p. 320.

[146] Ibid., p. 149.

The origin was from the occurrence of white feathers in the tails of game cocks which denoted inferior breeding; hence, an indication of cowardice.[147]

Portrayal of the North. No less interesting are the allusions to folklore used in portrayal of the North. Describing the swarms of people who crowd Washington, the Northern capital, during the War, Benét sums it up by saying that there are "Rich man, poor man, soldier, beggarman, thief."[148] This is lifted almost word for word from the old folk custom of counting buttons to find out the profession of a future husband:

> Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief
> Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief.[149]

Returning, as he often does, to the unifying theme of the poem--John Brown's anti-slavery spirit as it prevaded the Northern cause--Benét makes use again of the common folk belief in the supernatural:

> A straggler met him, going along to Manassas,
> With a gun on his shoulder, his phantom-sons at heel,
> His eyes like misty coals.
>
> A dead man saw him striding at Seven Pines,
> The bullets whistling through him like a torn flag,

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[147] James Murray and other, editors, A New English Dictionary, 10 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888-1928),

[148] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 155.

[149] Neal Frazier, "A Collection of Middle Tennessee Superstitions," Bulletin of the Tennessee Folklore Society, II (October, 1936), p. 43.

A madman saw him whetting a sword on a Bible,
A cloud above Malvern Hill.[150]

And again, in connection with an invocation to the spirit of Brown to rise and rally the Northern cause, the supernatural is used:

Arise, John Brown,
Call up your sons from the ground,
In smoky wreaths, call up your sons to heel,
Call up the clumsy country boys you armed
With crazy pikes and a fantastic mind
. . . . . .
Call up the slug-riddled dead of Harper's Ferry
And cast them down the wind on a raid again.
This is the dark hour,
This is the ebb-tide,
This is the sunset, this is the defeat.[151]

The Northern medical auxiliaries to the Federal army at the battle of Fredericksburg are described as

. . . bringing up the precious supplies
In spite of hell and high water and pompous fools.[152]

"Hell and high water" is a folk expression, taking its figurative meaning from instances which were pretty close to the literal.

Another Northern expression deeply imbedded in the folk usage, and even yet not forgotten is "bleeding Kansas."[153]

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[150] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 183.

[151] Ibid., p. 184.

[152] Ibid., p. 163.

[153] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

a phrase which Benét uses in the well-known sense of a State torn by border fights between Missourians and abolitionists. Thoroughly a part of folk parlance, its origin in the New York Tribune is forgotten.[154]

Piles of Northern battle casualties at Fredericksburg are compared, in earthy simile, to "cordwood." (Wood, the usual fuel in rural areas, is measured in cords of 128 cubic feet.) The awful cheapness of human life in the Civil War is summed up by the phrase in which General Burnside regards with horror the casualties:

> "Those men over there," he groans, "Those men over there"
> --They are piled like cordwood in front of the stone wall--[155]

Another Northern general, McClellan, is credited with superstitious apprehension:

> . . . and he hinders himself
> By always thinking the odds on the other side
> And that witches of ruin haunt each move he makes.[156]

Jack Ellyat, the New England soldier. One of the most interesting characters on the Northern side (in this narrative poem) is Jack Ellyat. Though only a humble enlisted man, he receives much attention. Benét's plan, in part, was to show the conflict through the effects on, and reactions of, ordinary, everyday people. Early in our acquaintance with Jack, we are told that

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[154] Dictionary of American English.

[155] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 208.

[156] Ibid., p. 159.

> . . . Ellyat trampled [the leaves] down
> Crackling, like cast-off skins of fairy snakes.[157]

This figure, interestingly, combines the earthy, homely comparison of leaves to snake skins with the frequently-found element of fantasy in folklore, so that we have "cast-off skins of fairy snakes."

The time of year is described as

> . . . ruddy October, the old harvester,
> Wrapped like a beggared sachem in a coat
> Of tattered tanager and partridge feathers,
> Scattering jack-o-lanterns everywhere.[158]

There is a double element of folk material here, first in comparison of October to the once proud and now-impoverished Indian, already becoming a legend in the Civil War era; and, second, in the recognition of the homely folk art of carving jack-o-lanterns. The word as used here refers simply to pumpkins.

When Jack Ellyat sleeps at Gettysburg on the night before the battle, it is said,

> And if his bed was harder than Jacob's stone
> Yet he could sleep on it now and be glad for sleep.[159]

The stone to which reference is made is well known to those whose daily speech is shaped in part by Biblical traditions. Jacob, at Bethel, "took of the stones of that place, and

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[157] Ibid., p. 14.

[158] Ibid., p. 14.

[159] Ibid., p. 263.

put them for his pillows."[160]

And in the morning before he was wounded at Gettysburg, Ellyat thinks,

> I feel funny today. . .
> I wonder if those other two felt like this,
> John Haberdeen and the corporal from Millerstown?
> What's it like to see your name on a bullet?
> It must feel queer.[161]

This is the old Army tradition that the bullet which is destined to find you has your name written on it.

Only once is the old, outdated tradition of witchcraft mentioned in connection with Jack Ellyat, even though he is from the section where belief in witches once flourished. Used as a more or less conventional figure of speech, the phrase,

Not all the broomstick witches of New England

occurs once in Ellyat's thoughts.

What strikes one, however, in the folklore concerning Connecticut-born Jack Ellyat, is the relatively small amount of folk material which is genuinely American, either by origin or tradition, and the comparatively large amount of classical myth.

> He glanced at the clock. On top of it was Phaeton
> Driving bronze, snarling horses down the sharp,
> Quicksilver, void, careening gulfs of air.
> Until they smashed upon a black marble sea.
> The round spiked trophy of the brazen sun

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160 Genesis (Authorized Version) 28:11.

161 Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 264.

Weighed down his chariot with its heavy load
Of ponderous fire.
To be like Phaeton
And drive the trophy-sun!
But he and his horses
Were frozen in their attitude of snarling,
Frozen forever to the tick of a clock.
. . . . . .
. . . cast down
The huge sun thundering on the black marble
Of the mantelpiece, streaked with white veins of foam.
If once such things could happen, all could happen
. . . . . .
Some better recompense for life than life,
The untamed ghost, the undiminished star.

But it would not happen. Nothing would ever happen.
He had been here, like this, ten thousand times,
He had been here, like this, ten thousand more,
Until at last the little ticks of the clock
Had cooled what had been hot. . .
. . . . . .
And it would be over. Over without having been.[162]

With this introduction, the Phaeton symbolism is later brought in again and again as the author probes Ellyat's innermost mind. The use of classical folklore rather than that of the unlettered frontiersman is appropriate to a New England youth of the time of the Civil War. Later, the rude ballads of his western army acquaintance, Bailey, have an appeal to Jack, but they obviously come to him with the novelty of something unfamiliar.

The greater the amount of formal education, the less chance--as a rule-- there is of folklore surviving in an individual's culture. And Jack Ellyat is presented as

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[162] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

being from a family in which even the daughter learns Latin--an unusual accomplishment for girls of that day. His section of the United States, New England, was the first part of the nation to provide universal education. According to one authority, the Massachusetts law of 1647

> . . . ordered those towns of one hundred families or over which had failed to fall in line, to establish such [grammar] schools immediately or to pay a penalty of five pounds and send their children to the nearest town having a school. This story was repeated in Connecticut, where New Haven, Hartford, and one or two other small towns set up the first schools. The Massachusetts Law of 1647 was copied on the Connecticut statute books in 1650.[163]

Despite reverses which the public education system suffered, New England continued to lead in that field. Massachusetts, in 1827

> . . . passed a law requiring towns of 500 families to establish high schools. Other New England states followed this example. . . . There were well over a hundred institutions of this type in the United States by [1860],[164] the majority being located in New England.

This was in addition to private academies. As for classical education, which would promote the knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology, from 1825 to 1860

> . . . this classical tradition continued. . . . The gilded gloss of ancient learning adorned conversations in the elite social circles of the East. . . . The Massachusetts Law of 1827. . . required towns of

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[163] Noble, op. cit., p. 30.

[164] Ibid., p. 189.

> four thousand inhabitants or over to employ a master able to give instruction in Latin and Greek. The prestige of Latin, however, led a number of towns of smaller population to offer the subject. . . by 1860 Latin was offered in most of them.[165]

With this background, then, it is to be expected that Ellyat would be familiar with such stories as the one relating how Phaeton undertook to drive the chariot of the sun and was upset, parching all Libya and injuring all Africa.[166]

Ellyat is pictured, furthermore, through the medium of his acquaintance with Norse mythology. This is used, together with a passing allusion to the Phaeton story, in recording Ellyat's reaction to the eerie rain in the forest after he had escaped from his Southern captors:

> Now the slant rain began
> To creep through his sodden heart. He thought, with wild awe,
> "This is Nibelung Hall. I am lying in Nibelung Hall.
> I am long dead. I fell there out of the sky
> In a wreck of horses, spilling the ball of the sun,
> And they shut my eyes with stone runes and put me to sleep
> On a bier where the living stream perpetually flows
> Past Ygdrasil and waters the roots of the world.
> I can hear the ravens scream from the cloudy roof.
> I can hear the bubbles rising in the clear stream.
> I can hear the old gods shout in the heathen sky
> As the hawk-Valkyrie carry the stiffened lumps
> Of corpse-faced heroes shriekingly to Valhalla.
> This is Nibelung Hall. I must break the runes from my eyes.
> I must escape it or die."[167]

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165 Ibid., pp. 220-222.

166 Brewer, op. cit., p. 966.

167 Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 114.

And,

> He had lain with hel-shoes on in Nibelung Hall
> For twenty years.[168]

Valhalla, of course, was the paradise of Norse warriors. Nibelung, from nebel, darkness, was the mythical king of Nibelungland, or Norway, in Scandinavian mythology. The inhabitants were "children of mist or darkness."[169] Hel-shoes were indispensable for the journey to Valhalla.[170] Ygdrasil was the ash tree with three roots, from under each of which flowed a fountain of wonderful virtues.[171]

Jack Ellyat learns from his companion, Bailey, the old folk song, "The Weaver's Song," which is concerned with illicit love. The theme of the song provides a vehicle for Ellyat's conflicting thoughts on love, particularly after he has met Melora Vilas. The possibility suggested by the words he sings attracts, and at the same time repels him. His actions are all seen, in his mind's eye, in terms of the weaver.

> He couldn't stay with Melora.
> He couldn't take her back home, If he were Bailey
> He would know what to do. He would follow the weaver's tune.

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[168] Ibid., p. 120.

[169] Brewer, op. cit., p. 886.

[170] Ibid., p. 597.

[171] Ibid., p. 1319.

He would keep Melora a night from the foggy dew
And then go off with the sunrise to tell the tale
Sometime for a campfire yarn. But he wasn't Bailey.
He saw himself dead without ever having Melora
And he didn't like it.
Maybe, after the war,
Maybe he could come back to the hider's place,
Maybe--it is a long time till after the war
And this is now--you took a girl when you found her--
A girl with flags on her garters or a new girl--
It didn't matter--it made a good campfire yarn--
It was men and women--Bailey--the weaver's tune--[172]

There is a parallel, in some respects, between the story of Jack and Melora, and certain old English ballads in which a foreign woman sought out her English lover after he had returned to his homeland. During the long search for Jack, John Vilas, recognizing this, says of his daughter:

She mixes with that song I used to know
About the Spanish lady of old days
Who loved the Englishman and sought for him
All through green England in her scarlet shoes,
Knowing no word of English but his name.[173]

The ballad to which Vilas refers may be a variant of "The Turkish Lady," otherwise titled "Lord Bateman," or "Lord Bayham." Under the last-named of these titles, there is a version in which an English captive of the Turks was freed by one of their daughters, with mutual pledges of love which were to be observed for seven years. A little after the seven years had passed, the "Turkish

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[172] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 128.

[173] Ibid., p. 301.

lady" seeks out the former captive at his English home, just as he is about to marry an English girl. He gives up his prospective bride to marry his fair liberator.[174]

A folk custom, common to lovers, is observed by Jack and Melora:

> . . . They had broken the dime together.
> They had cut the heart on the tree.
> The jack-knife cut
> Two pinched half-circles on white on the green bark.
> The tree-gum bled from the cuts in sticky-clear drops,
> And there you were.
> And shortly the bark would dry
> Dead on the living wood and leave the white heart. . . [175]

Melora, uneasy over the disappearance of Jack, and considering the possibility of his having been killed, says, "No, I'd know if he'd died."[176] She is evincing belief in the faculty known variously as mental telepathy, hunches, feminine intuition or second sight. The ability to "feel" occurrences affecting those close to us is as typical of folk beliefs as any which could be singled out.

Another Northern soldier, Jake Diefer the Pennsylvanian, worries about the farm he has left in the hands of his wife and son, and finds that

> The weather bothers him more than anything.
> He knows it's not the same sort of weather down here,
> But every day when he wakes, he looks at the sky
> And tries to figure out what it's like back home.[177]

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[174] Pound, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 14.

[175] Benét, <u>John Brown's Body</u>, p. 130.

[176] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 177.

[177] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 176. Folk beliefs as to weather are so numerous that at least one entire book has been devoted to them: Richard Edwards' <u>Weather Lore</u> (London: Elliot Stock, 1898).

The appearance of the sky, particularly as to brilliancy or lack of it, and as to color, figures largely in weather omens. As example of what Jake Diefer may have been looking for is found in the old rhyme,

> Evening red and morning grey
> Sets the traveler on his way;
> Evening grey and morning red [178]
> Lets the rain fall on his head.

Portrayal of the West. The West, as well as the North and South, comes in for some attention. The graphic allusions to the new states, "the buffalo states," have been mentioned already. Elsewhere, Benét conveys a feeling of the frontier, of the primitive, through one of the most distinctive of folk customs--typical foods:

> Country of bronze wild turkeys and catfish fries
> . . . . . .
> A province of mush and milk. . .
> . . . . . .
> A mudsill man with the river-wash in his ears,
> Munching the coarse, good meal of a johnny cake
> Hot from the hob--even now it tastes of the brush,
> The wilderness, the big lost star in the pines.[179]

The mention of typical foods is practically a convention in American-made folksongs, as in "Cheyenne Boys":

> Come all you pretty girls and listen to my noise,
> I'll tell you not to marry the Cheyenne boys,

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[178] Frazier, op. cit., p. 38.

[179] Benét, John Brown's Body, pp. 98-99.

For if you do, a portion it will be;
Cold butter milk and johnny cake is all you'll ever see.
Cold butter milk and johnny cake is all you'll ever see.[180]

In depicting the West, too, the supernatural finds a place:

And when the brief
Screech of the railway-whistle stabs at the trees
. . . . . .
Ghost-steamboats answer it from the sucking brown water.

The forest, hewn away from the painful clearing
For a day or a year, with sweat and back-breaking toil,
But waiting to come back, to crush the crude house
And the planted space with vines and trailers of green,
To quench the fire on the hearth with running green saps,
With a chant of green. . . .[181]

Folk expressions find utterance in the mouth of the Western soldier, Bailey. Marching through Georgia with Sherman, Bailey was having a good time: "Oh, it was gravy, it was the real duck soup."[182] These expressions both mean a sinecure, or "easy pickings." The term "gravy" in this sense is used by Carl Sandburg in a play on words: "The coat and pants do all the work but the vest gets all the gravy."[183]

Bailey, at the Wingate home, says,

". . . make him rustle some water,
I'm as dry as a preacher's tongue."[184]

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[180] Pound, op. cit., p. 175.

[181] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 99.

[182] Ibid., p. 311.

[183] Sandburg, The American Songbag, p. 208.

[184] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 314.

Imagery like that comes directly from the untutored and long-suffering layman listening to over-long sermons of pioneer circuit-riders.

In Benét's cast of characters for John Brown's Body, the greatest Westerner of them all was Abraham Lincoln. Benét takes note of the premonition of disaster which Lincoln is said to have had on the morning of the day he was assassinated:

> The gaunt man, Abraham Lincoln, woke one morning
> From a new dream that was yet an old dream
> For he had known it many times before
> And, usually, its coming prophesied
> Important news of some sort, good or bad,
> Though mostly good as he remembered it.
>
> He had been standing on the shadowy deck
> Of a black formless boat that moved away
> From a dim bank, into wide, gushing waters--
> River or sea, but huge--and as he stood,
> The boat rushed into darkness like an arrow
> Gathering speed--and as it rushed, he woke.[185]

The beliefs that dreams foreshadow events is old, and firmly ingrained in the minds of that part of the population which depends in large part on folk-culture. Lincoln hesitates to tell his dream, but reflects that

> . . . nearly everyone had some pet quirk
> Knocking on wood or never spilling salt,
> Ladders or broken mirrors or a Friday.[186]

All these are quite common superstitions, of course--bad

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[185] Ibid., p. 330.

[186] Ibid., p. 330.

luck to spill salt, walk under ladders, break mirrors or start anything on a Friday; and knocking on wood to avert bad luck.

Folklore of the sea. Another type of life, that of the sea, is touched on in John Brown's Body, and the folklore of the sailor helps make it vivid. A sea chanty is used to describe the pious Yankee captain of a slave ship:

> Captain Ball was a Yankee slaver,
> Blow, blow, blow the man down!
> He traded in niggers and loved his Saviour,
> Give me some time to blow the man down.[187]

This is clearly an adaptation of a genuine chanty:

> You're off from some clipper that flies the Black Ball,
> To me aye, aye--blow the man down!
> You've robbed some poor Dutchman of coat, boots and all;
> Blow the man down to me aye, aye, blow the man down!
> Whether he's white man or black man or brown,
> Give me some time to blow the man down,
> Give me some time to blow the man down,
> Blow the man down! bullies![188]

The imagery of the sea is borrowed to describe Sally Dupre's eyes:

> Sea-changing eyes, with the deep, drowned glimmer
> Of bar-gold crumbling from sunken ships,
> Where the sea-dwarfs creep through the streaked, green shimmer
> To press the gold to their glass-cold lips.[189]

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[187] Ibid., p. 11.

[188] Sandburg, The American Songbag, p. 404.

[189] Benét, John Brown's Body, p. 65.

This passage is doubly-rich with folk elements: first, in the reference to lost treasure in the sea, which often accompanies sailors' tales of pirates and wrecked ships; and, second, in mentioning "sea-dwarfs." The little people, in varied supernatural forms, are typical of folklore the world over. Belief in supernatural or marvellous creatures of the sea has been recorded since the dawn of history, mermaids and sea monsters being common.

In the introduction of iron-clad vessels to naval warfare, Benét could not resist the opportunity to conjure up a ghostly fleet of all the wooden vessels in the history of the world, from the "huge ghost-flagship of the Ark" to the vessels actually engaged by the Merrimac, and to sink them forever.[190] They go down, in his account, to the region "where Davy Jones drinks everlasting rum." It is interesting to observe that, as a synonym for this place, he uses the term "Fiddler's Green." This mythical place is a "land of leal for sailors, where the fiddle never ceases for untiring sailors, where there is plenty of grog, and unstinted tobacco."[191] It is "a sailor's elysium, in which wine, women and song figure predominantly," but is used to denote other future abodes; for

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[190] Ibid., p. 104.

[191] Brewer, op. cit., p. 457.

example, in 1825 Sporting Magazine, XVI, 404, printed the remark, "May grannan. . . used to tell me that animals, when they departed this life, were destined to be fixed in Fidler's Green."[192] And when General Jonathan Wainwright, retiring from active duty after World War II, purchased a residence in San Antonio, he announced that he would name it "Fiddler's Green," since, he said, that is where all old cavalrymen go.

Evaluation

When an artist of the caliber of Stephen Vincent Benét so obviously chooses a specific medium in which to work--in this case the medium of folk materials--we cannot but ask why.

He could have told the story of the Civil War in many ways. He could have related his story in terms of political ambitions, military strategy, the tragedy of broken families, the hopes and fears of the slaves, the fierce determination of the abolitionists, the patriotic fervor of the Southerners. His poem could have been pitched on a note of wartime exaltation, of abject misery, of fear, of opportunistic greed, of sorrow. Somehow, he has managed to strike all these notes in creating his melody, at the same time harmonizing the whole with a

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[192] New English Dictionary.

constant background of folk song, myth, custom and speech.

This all-pervading folk atmosphere has, as the first and obvious reason for its use, the merit of giving the breath of life to his characters. Most characters in real life--and in a story if it is to be true to life--are not likely to express their emotions through formal phrases of an abstract nature. Their thoughts and speech unconsciously and instinctively reflect the thoughts and speech of those who have lived in the past and, in dying, have left a little of themselves behind. They think, talk and act as the legend which is a part of their being directs them. It does not matter that some of those after whom they model themselves never even lived--that the predecessor and instructor is no more than a name in a ballad, a nickname in a legend. Folklore is as real as the part it plays in human motives and human relations.

The element of folklore might have been ignored by a writer of genius whose background was restricted to formal, academic learning. Such a writer might have achieved sublimity through use of formal diction. He probably would have made much more use of major figures such as Lee. But for a writer like Benét, who had a keen, conscious awareness of the folk culture, there probably was no escaping the use of a folk element which would enhance reality. This part of his style must have been a necessity, arising from the very nature of a mind so

soundly versed in folklore.

If all other factors are equal, there can be no doubt that the pulsing, throbbing life imparted by the folk element will create a more memorable poem. Try to picture the bitterly, sardonically gay Wainscott Bristol shorn of the speech which comes from folk customs: When he learns that his little unit is to face the battle-din of an entire Northern corps, saying, "Boys, we're booked for the chivaree." When he acknowledges the orders to fight to the last,

> "Thank you," said Bristol, "that's mighty sweet,
> You will not remain at the mourner's seat?
> No sir? Well, I imagined not,
> For from this time hence it will be right hot."

And, when facing death in the final seconds of the unequal skirmish, saying,

> "Here we go on the red dog's back!
> High, low, jack and the goddam game!"

Something in Bristol typifies the romantic, carefree spirit which a great deal of the South shared with him, and his words arouse an echo from ten thousand ghostly mouths:

> "Here we go, here we go,
> The last events of the minstrel show!
> . . . . . .
> The old Confederate minstrel show!"

Nor can we imagine as real a portrayal of the Northern soldier, Jake Diefer, if at his parting from his wife on their Pennsylvania farm he did not speak in terms

taken in using the folkstuff in an unhampered manner to achieve artistic purposes.

In the hands of a more literal-minded writer, less imaginative and sure of himself and his materials than was Benét, there could have been as many allusions to the folk materials as we find in this poem. As used by such a writer, however, they would have been faithful copies, true to the records, fitted in as best they might be, with square corners here and there wedged into round holes.

Benét avoids this approach. He takes the speech, songs, myths and customs of the people, and like a potter moulds them into the forms he needs. The folk material still has the characteristics of the clay from whence it came, but it is shaped into a pattern harmonizing with the design of the poem. To understand the sort of thing that is meant by this, let us look at the sea chanty which has as its subject Captain Ball, the Yankee slave trader. Benét had as his raw materials the traditional sea chanty, "Blow the Man Down," the record of slavers who often were nominally-religious New Englanders, and the conception of his own Captain Ball as an individual character. He could have used the original sea chanty as atmosphere, but it would have been partial in effect and unsatisfying for his particular purpose. He could simply have portrayed the state of mind of a ship master

who could, with a rigid Puritan mind, complacently deal in his fellow men, but by this means would have lost the perspective on Captain Ball's character which actually is achieved.

What Benét does is to make use of the pliability of folk materials, and recast the old sea chanty so as to achieve an ironic commentary on the incongruity of Ball's character. At the same time he forecasts by implication the downfall of Ball's unsavory occupation--

> He traded in niggers and loved his Saviour,
> Give me some time to blow the man down.

Put the chanty, artistically created of folk materials, in the mouths of seamen, then give Captain Ball himself a stubborn, self-righteous awareness of the song they had made about him, and the depiction of Ball is made more actual through a sort of double perspective.

The same technique is used throughout the poem. The Fates spinning their thread, for example, are changed, on the eve of the battle of Gettysburg, into Fate, the rider who preceded "those lumbering hosts," carrying his "skein of omen," and who

> . . . knotted the skeins together and flung them down
> With a sound like metal.

The happiness of Benét's decision to work largely in folk materials, from the standpoint of this pliability which he contrives, is made more apparent if we consider

that he could not exercise this technique with bare facts. On the contrary, Benét is meticulously accurate in his factual data. He takes note of, and rejects, the popular story that John Brown kissed a slave child on his way to execution. He observes that Jefferson Davis, at the time of his capture, appeared in an undignified light through having hastily and accidentally snatched up his wife's cloak instead of his own. More dramatic was the once-widespread story that Davis tried to escape disguised as a woman, but Benét nowhere stoops to conscious perversion of fact. In the field of folk materials he selects, combines, alters and augments to achieve the effect he desires. But he always uses myth which is known to be myth, or he tags it as such. No folklore is used in such a way as to significantly distort history.

A third reason for the use of folklore in John Brown's Body lies in its adaptability to symbolism. Particularly as Benét remoulds traditional folk culture into new forms does it possess this quality. A tendency may be observed in some folk materials (along with many other ideas and images) to become symbolic at one stage in their existence. The folk song, for example, first refers to persons, places and events familiar to the persons who sing and hear it. Then it tends to lose the sharp focus of the individual, and may become a symbol, enriched as it gains abstract

qualities. As time goes by, the song itself may deteriorate, or the background may grow unfamiliar so as to make the allusions obscure. As a result, the song enters a final stage in which it is neither history or symbol, but is sung only for the beauty of its music and its wistful nostalgia. Folk songs about Jesse James once told a vivid story of contemporary events, and expressed personal attitudes at a time when men held varied and strong attitudes toward the Missouri outlaw. Later, the songs took on a broader significance as they came to stand for a colorful era of the Midwest. They were a symbol for a certain state of the society of that section. Today, it is unlikely that "the dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard" conveys to the general public little more than an idea of quaintness. The words have sunk into the folk consciousness, but for folk materials which convey definite ideas, or which constitute living symbols, we have to turn to other lore which either is more tenacious or is of later date. Taking another very humble folk song as an example, "Casey Jones" was at one time a very real, individual person to those who knew him as a man of their own times. At present, Jones as a mere person has faded out for all but a very few; he has been elevated to a symbol of courageous devotion to duty. And when new forms of transportation have replaced the railroad, the song

if it survives will be just a quaint old ballad which people do not understand. "Yankee Doodle" has passed the first stage in which it meant a rustic dandy. For many years it has stood as a symbol of the New England spirit of independence. The time may come when it will mean to most people only an odd old ditty which early Americans sang for no very clear reason.

Benét has recognized the possibilities for symbolism which lie inherent in folk materials of this second stage, in materials which he has recast to give a new meaning, and in the forms themselves. The function to which he applies them, however, transcends any symbolic nature which they may have approached in their original state. The song of the thirteen sisters, duplicating many characteristics of the ballad form, and using the supernatural in the introduction of the black ghost in chains, is a powerful and obvious symbolic presentation of the position of America with regard to slavery. The Phaeton symbolism recurs throughout the poem, holding a mystical, half seen attraction for Jack Ellyat. In Book Seven, Ellyat sums it up:

> This life, this burning,
> This fictive war that is over, this toy death,
> These were the pictures of Phaeton.
> This is Phaeton.

The introduction of the old folk song, "Foggy,

Foggy Dew," brings in, in symbolic form, the attitudes toward sex of the uninhibited, irresponsible westerner, Bailey, and of the more rigidly-trained Jack Ellyat. As a final illustration of the use of folk materials for symbolic effect we may consider the odyssey of John Vilas and his daughter. With all the allusions to Peter Rugg, Johnny Appleseed and other characters of the folk imaginations, the Vilas father and daughter in becoming "a concertina tune" become also the embodiment of all the wanderers of American roads, the restless of all generations.

These seem to be the most logical reasons why Benét consciously went to folklore for a means of achieving his purpose. It will be of interest, also, to ascertain just what Benét has given us in the poem as a whole. Looking first at the structure, we are struck by the essential lack of unity. To assert that it is unified by the spirit of John Brown, the fanatical, unreasoning abolitionist spirit which sought to tear down the institution that bound the Spades, but which did not want the responsibility of giving them a place in their own free society, is to advance too casual a definition of unity. The same may be said of a pseudo-unity based on the relation of all the cast of characters to the Civil War.

The unity which the audience demands of an art, that which holds a group of closely related individuals

together in a causal relationship, with the events being focussed on one or two principal individuals, is missing. There is a possible relationship between this flaw and the use of folk material. It is evident that Benét takes a personal, almost a physical delight in his folk materials. It may be that they held such an attraction for him that he was unable to dispense with all the characters and events which they suggested--unable to prune away the many so the few could dominate. If this is not the reason, then it must have been something which was not concerned in one way or another with his use of folklore--such as an absorbing interest in the poetry of his work, at the expense of plot; or a basic inability to see true unity or lack of it. The last of these possibilities must be discounted, however. It seems likely that Benét himself perceived the disunity of John Brown's Body. He apparently recognizes it when he declares,

> Jake Diefer, the barrel-chested Pennsylvanian,
> Shippy, the little man with the sharp rat-eyes,
> Luke Breckinridge, the gawky boy from the hills,
> Clay Wingate, Melora Vilas, Sally Dupre,
> The slaves in the cabins, ragged Spade in the woods,
> We have lost these creatures under a falling hammer.
> We must look for them now, again.

Closely related to this matter is the lack of sustained poetry through the work as a whole. This also bears a relation to the unusual amount of folk materials. In this case, the recurrent introduction of the folk

element occasionally is a disrupting influence. There are passages of superb poetic beauty (". . . infinite flakes that brought the tall sky down / Till I could put my hands in the white sky") including many which are built with the material of folk activity. For example, the homely dyepot with its makeshift dyes, in which Sally Dupre has marred the beauty of her hands, leads her to regret her pride and reserve toward the man whom she loves, and say:

> I will dye my heart
> In a pot of queen's delight, in the pokeberry sap,
> I will dye it red and black in the fool's old colors
> And send it to him, wrapped in a calico rag. . . .

But all too often the poetic quality plods or is missing altogether, and too often it does so in those passages where Benét uses the speech or traditions of the folk, interesting enough when not so common as to constitute cliches, but not caught up onto the musical quality of poetry. One passage will suffice to show what is meant--that in which the mountaineer cousins, Luke and Jim, discuss the war which is starting:

> They went along together after that
> But neither of them spoke for half-a-mile,
> Then finally, Jim said, half-diffidently,
> "You know who we air goin' to fight outside?
> I heard it was the British. Air that so?"
> "Hell, no," said Luke, with scorn. He puckered his brows.
> "Dunno's I rightly know just who they air."
> He admitted finally, "But 'tain't the British.
> It's some trash-lot of furriners, that's shore.
> They call 'em Yankees near as I kin make it,
> But they ain't Injuns neither."

Fortunately, the verse does not often fall as flat as this.

Apart from the sublime and the flat passages, I am inclined to agree as to the bulk of the work with Basil Davenport, in his introduction to the Selected Works of Benét. Recognizing the good and the poor, he says:

> . . . he attacks one of the primary problems of verse in our day, the finding of a form which may bear the same relation to our easy-going talk that, presumably, blank verse did to the more formal speech of an earlier generation. Half a dozen poets are attempting it; Benét was one of the first in the field, and I think is the most successful, with the long, loose, five- or six-beat line that carries the bulk of John Brown's Body. It will be improved in the later poems; in John Brown's Body it is sometimes a little too loose, coming perilously near prose; yet it can carry casual conversations without incongruity, or at need can deepen without any sense of abrupt transition into blank verse for the nobility of Lincoln or Lee, or even slip into rhyme for the romantics of the Wingates. And it passes the great test for existence as a metre: single lines of it stay in your memory, existing by themselves.
>
> It is over now, but they will not let it be over.
>
> Professor Procrustes could explain that as an iambic or an anapaestic line, and name its variations; but to plain common sense it is neither. It is in a metre of its own; one of our time; one which Benét has given us.[193]

Davenport's comment has a definite relation to the subject of folk speech, insofar as the adaptation of metre to "our easy-going talk" is an adaptation to the folk elements in speech.

Leaving the subject of structure and form for the

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[193] Basil Davenport, "Stephen Vincent Benét," in Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), I, x-xi.

thought in John Brown's Body, as that thought is expressed through or affected by folk materials, we find the author concerned mainly with the phenomenon of his country. Philosophical and spiritual speculation may enter at times, but chances are that even then such speculation will be motivated by or related to the nation, still his main concern. Like many another man, poet and layman alike, who is ruled largely by patriotic motives, Benét seeks the quality which above all is American, the common denominator for all people of this country. He avows a desire

> . . . to see you as you really are,
> So how to suck the pure, distillate, stored
> Essence of essence from the hidden star
> . . . . . .
> The pure elixir, the American thing.

He admits the difficulty of the task, and calls to mind several scenes, as different as can be imagined--memories which he, using imagery drawn from the popular custom of keeping souvenirs from the past, says that he keeps

> . . . forever, like the sea-lion's tusk
> The broken sailor brings away to land,
> But when he touches it, he smells the musk,
> And the whole sea lies hollow in his hand.

The figure of speech serves to reveal the difficulty which Benét faces. The diversity of pictures he creates does go far toward revealing "the whole sea" that is America, but the sea has too many qualities, too many moods, too many parts to be seen easily in terms of a single attribute.

Despite the difficulty, he says,

> I think that I have seen you, not as one,
> But clad in diverse semblances and powers,
> Always the same, as light falls from the sun,
> And always different, as the differing hours.

In other words, there is an essential quality to the American spirit which remains always, basically, the same, just as sunlight is always the same. The quality in its appearance or in its effects may seem different from time to time, just as there is an apparent difference in the sun's rays in early morning, at noon and at sunset.

The image is well conceived, but unfortunately John Brown's Body does little to bolster it up. To the extent that similar characteristics are shown generally in all characters, to the same extent are they common to mankind in general. The Yankee, the Rebel, the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Westerner, the mountaineer all fight for what they conceive to be Right--but so, throughout history, have Roman, Chinese, Abyssinian and Arab. And if a militant devotion to principle is seen as the basic American quality, it becomes something more than a problem to explain John Vilas who says, "A plague on both your houses," and hides in the woods with his family. As for the ideal of liberty, even if men had not died for it centuries before America was heard of, he would be making out a poor case for it as the essence of America with his sanctimonious Captain Balls, his peon-driving Mr. Braids, and his

complacent Gudjos. With his women, Benét comes even less near achieving a common denominator. Jack Ellyat's Puritan mother, the sophisticated Mary Lou Wingate and the wild thing that is Melora Vilas live in separate worlds, by separate codes.

It would seem that Benét might have been approaching a fusion of the traits that were to make one spirit for all America when he wrote:

> Let the consuming coal
> That was [John Brown's] furious soul
> And still like iron groans,
> Anointed with the earth,
> Grow colder than the stones
> . . . . . .
> . . . bury the purple dream
> Of the America we have not been,
> The tropic empire, seeking the warm sea,
> The last foray of aristocracy
> Based not on dollars or initiative. . . .

However, out of the death of these two elements, the quixotic, Puritan fanaticism, and the undemocratic feudal system, Benét does not see the evolution of a spiritual golden mean. Instead,

> Out of John Brown's strong sinews the tall skyscrapers grow,
> Out of his heart the chanting buildings rise,
> Rivet and girder, motor and dynamo
> . . . . . .
> . . . the engine-handed Age,
> The genie we have raised to rule the earth. . . .

Now, it is admissible that from the destruction of slavery industrialism has been accelerated, at least in the South, and that from the national unity assured by the outcome of the Civil War the country as a whole has

been enabled to become more highly industralized and mechanized. And it is admissible, in a poetic sense, that this machine age is the product of the death of two antagonistic cultures. But if we remember that we are still seeking the "essence" of America, we cannot admit that the advent of an economic situation is the vital quality. We are looking for a spiritual or mental thread that runs through the entire fabric--but we do not find it.

J. Donald Adams, in his The Shape of Books to Come, suggests that the characteristic trait of America is "that sense of expectancy which has possessed us as a people from the beginning."[194] You may look for a development of that trait by Benét--but as often as you find it, you will find a Wainscott Bristol with a bitter disdain of the future, a Judah P. Benjamin who slips away rather than face it, an Edmund Ruffin who kills himself rather than cope with it, and an Abraham Lincoln who wants only "a quiet time."

Outstanding in John Brown's Body is the love for the various people of America which Benét displays. This is the part of Benét that is best seen through the folklore which he employs--the folklore which draws them in attractive,

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[194] J. Donald Adams, The Shape of Books to Come (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p. 157.

warm colors. The same relish is displayed in his description of the various parts of the country.

Jack Ellyat was "glad to be Connecticut born." Elspeth Mackay's "walk was as gallant as Highland heather."

> . . . wherever the winds of Georgia run,
> It smells of peaches long in the sun.
> . . . . . .
> Here Christmas stops at everyone's house
> With a jug of molasses and green, young boughs,
> . . . . . .
> Oh, Georgia. . . Georgia. . . the careless yield!

John Brown "must have his justice, after all. He was a lover of certain pastoral things." "I like your way of talking, Mr. Brua." Cudjo "was faithful as bread and salt, A flawless servant without a fault." Jefferson Davis is "the gentleman Who neither forces his gentility Nor let it be held lightly."

Individual instances could be multiplied. The total effect of the poem is that Benét likes his characters, likes the places they come from, in a warm, personal way. He looks at various groups with sympathy.

When the Applachian mountaineers have lost their distinguishing traits,

> Something will pass that was American
> And all the movies will not bring it back.

The Northern forces are praised as an "army of brave men, Beaten again and again but never quite broke." As for the Southern soldiers, "there was something in you that matched your fable." There is a warmth in the vivid

folk imagery describing the industrious, contented people of Gettysburg:

. . . ripe country of broad-backed horses,
Valley of cold, sweet springs and dairies with limestone floors.

Of the Negro, he says,

. . . some day, a poet will rise to sing you
And sing you with such truth and mellowness,
--Deep mellow of the husky, golden voice
. . . . . .
That you will be a match for any song. . . .

The affection with which Benét handles the people, the scenes and the traditions of the past are evidence of the regret with which he sees that past melt away. With all its evils, he feels that the North, the South and the West we knew have values which are absent today. The "something American" of the mountaineers is a case in point. And there is a wistfulness in the way the house of Wingate symbolizes the manner in which the war left the South desolate, never again to be the same. Folk figures as homely as corn meal symbolize the change:

Let us look at her now, let us see her plain,
She will never be quite like this again.
Her house is rocking under the blast
And she hears it tremble, and still stands fast,
But this is the last, this is the last.
The last of the wine and the white corn meal,
The last of the fiddle sounding the reel,
The last of the silk with the Paris label,
The last blood-thoroughbred safe in the stable
--Yellow corn meal and a jackass colt,
A door that swings on a broken bolt,
Brittle old letters spotted with tears
And a wound that rankles for fifty years--
This is the last of Wingate Hall.

Benét does not, in looking wistfully at the past, ignore the necessity of today's realism. He has Jack Ellyat say:

> Only a fool goes looking for the wind
> That blew across his heartstrings yesterday,
> Or breaks his hands in the obscure attempt
> To dig the knotted roots of Time apart,
> Hoping to resurrect the golden mask
> Of the lost year inviolate from the ground.

But, though he makes Ellyat face realistic probabilities for the time being, Benét himself yields--perhaps unconsciously--to the "happy ending" so typical of folk aspirations when at the end he restores Melora to the Connecticut lad. In fact, the irresistibility of his innermost desire to follow basic folk patterns is revealed in the Invocation. Discussing there his self-imposed task of building a vision of the past from a hundred colorful memories, he says:

> And should that task seem fruitless in the eyes
> Of those a different magic sets apart
> To see through the ice-crystal of the wise
> No nation but the nation that is art,
>
> Their words are just. But when the birchbark call
> Is shaken with the sound that hunters make
> The moose comes plunging through the forest-wall
> Although the rifle waits beside the lake.

Benét's ill-concealed dismay at the changes undergone by the nation is not just a matter of losing what was charming and appealing in the past, including folk patterns and virtues. It is also a dislike for the

mechanization of our civilization. He recognizes the growth of the machine age as being an issue in the Civil War, when he describes Lee's soldiers:

> Army of Northern Virginia, fabulous army,
> Strange army of ragged individualists,
> The hunters, the riders, the walkers, the savage pastorals,
> The unmachined, the men come out of the ground,
> . . . . . .
> . . . the rebels against the wheels,
> The rebels against the steel combustion-chamber
> Of the half-born new age of engines and metal hands.

While the war goes on,

> . . . the factory chimneys smoke,
> A new age curdles and boils in a steel cauldron
> And pours into rails and wheels and fingers of steel,
> Steel is being born like a white-hot rose
> In the dark smoke-cradle of Pittsburg--

These are intimations of his attitude. But only in the final lines of the poem is the full force of his imagination given to picturing the industrialization which he credits the war's outcome with promoting. The pre-war South, he says, was

> The pastoral rebellion of the earth
> Against machines, against the Age of Steam,
> The Hamiltonian extremes against the Franklin mean,
> The genius of the land
> Against the metal hand. . . .

The spirit of John Brown, although strong in folk traditions, is credited as having unwittingly fathered the new industrialism:

> Out of his body grows revolving steel,
> Out of his body grows the spinning wheel
> Made up of wheels. . . .
> . . . . . .

The great, metallic beast
Expanding West and East,
His heart a spinning coil,
His juices burning oil,
His body serpentine.

We are led to believe that Brown himself (and Brown as a symbol of that agricultural part of the North which he represented) would not have desired that mechanization which has transpired:

He was a lover of certain pastoral things,
He had the shepherd's gift.
. . . . . .
He was a farmer, he didn't think much of towns,
The wheels, the vastness.
He liked the wide fields, the yellows, the lonely browns,
The black ewe's fastness.

The "engine-handed Age" is

The genie we have raised to rule the earth,
Obsequious to our will
But servant-master still,
The tireless serf already half a god--

Benét says enough about the machine age to show by implication that he deplores it. By implication he prefers the more casual, gentle times with which folk legend credits our pastoral past. But when he comes to an avowed attitude toward mechanization he is curiously non-committal. He advises:

. . . see the portent there,
With eyes for once washed clear
Of worship and of fear:
. . . . . .
You cannot read for omens.
Stand apart
From the loud crowd and look upon the flame
Alone and steadfast, without praise or blame.
This is reality that you have seen,
This is reality that made you blind.
. . . . . .
Let them applaud the image or condemn
But keep your distance and your soul from them.

If you at last must have a word to say,
Say neither, in their way,
"It is a deadly magic and accursed,"
Nor "It blest," but only "It is here."

Benét recognizes the reality of a condition he does not like, and the futility of railing against something which cannot be changed by such railing. But he also calls for a broader view of America, of humanity, of life, undistorted by a too-subjective attitude toward our present complicated, mechanical civilization. "If the heart within your breast must burst," he says,

Strive to recast once more
That attar of the ore
In the strong mold of pain
Till it is whole again. . . .

CHAPTER III

WESTERN STAR

Turning from John Brown's Body to Western Star, we find an abrupt decrease in the amount of what is normally considered strictly American folklore. This is not accounted for by the comparative brevity of the latter work (it is only the first unit of what was projected as three, four or five books), nor by the fact that it might have undergone alterations had the author lived.

At the time of Stephen Vincent Benét's untimely death on March 13, 1943, Book One had been put in shape for publication, and it is that part alone which was published in 1943. It is logical to believe that had the entire work been written as planned, Book One would have varied little from its present form, but that subsequent sections would have equalled or exceeded John Brown's Body in the volume and effectiveness of folk materials. Succeeding books, in tracing the movement of Americans across the continent, would have encountered more genuinely native materials.

The lack of Paul Bunyans, Negro spirituals and cowboy songs in Book One does not, however, detract from the book's interest from a folk standpoint. In the use of English folklore both in England and in the earliest

American colonies, Western Star lays a significant stress on the fact that our initial folk culture came from England. In relating Benét's writing to American folklore, we find Western Star pointing out that folk tradition and custom in Plymouth and Jamestown was an English heritage. But the portrayal of folk characteristics in an English setting would have been an entirely different thing, and would have given an entirely different effect, from the presentation of the same characteristics in an American setting, altered by time and by the American environment. Keeping these considerations in mind an examination of folk materials will prove interesting.

Introductory Sections

The Invocation. In his Invocation,[1] calling on the nation to remember the "nameless, numberless seed of the field. . . uprooted and cast upon the stone from Jamestown to Benicia," a few folk expressions crop out.

Scholars are designated as "arrowmakers of the soul, wasted with truth," using a reference to the folk art of aboriginal stone-workers. The "wilderness saints," "born out of time," are called "the few. . . who stood between the eater and the meat." The figure of speech has entered

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[1] Stephen Vincent Benét, Western Star (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1943), pp. vii-viii.

the folk consciousness along with a mass of other Biblical matter in the stately phraseology of the King James (or Authorized) version. It is found, of course, in Samson's riddle.[2] The poem, Western Star, is said to be the song of the many nameless and forgotten people who emigrated to the new land, and to be "branded with the iron of their star." This statement borrows language from a folk custom of later days, the use of the branding iron on western ranches.

The Prelude. Benét, in the Prelude, suggests that the American tendency to keep on the move may be "just a mere desire to take French leave."[3] The expression is a folk term for furtive or unceremonious departure. When the whistle blows, they prepare to travel, and if none is blown, "they can blow their own whistles of willow-stick and rabbit-bone."[4] This will arouse nostalgic memories to the millions of Americans who have used jack-knives to make their own whistles. The music to which America has traveled, Benét says in the words of World War I soldiers, has

> A dozen tunes but only one refrain,
> "We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way!"[5]

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[2] Judges (Authorized Version), 14:14.

[3] Benét, Western Star, p. 3.

[4] Ibid., p. 3.

[5] Ibid., p. 3.

The homely figures of Indian wampum, and rudely-fashioned horns and whistles, are introduced into the same section:

> The chunking of the bullfrogs in the creek
> Where the forgotten wampum slowly drowns,
> Cow-horn and turkey call. . . .[6]

Popular slogans, pastimes, expressions, manias and arts all play a part when the poet writes:

> Oh, paint your wagons with "Pike's Peak or Bust!"
> Pack up the fiddle, rosin up the bow,
> Vamoose, skedaddle, mosey, hit the grit!
> (We pick our words, like nuggets, for the shine,
> And, where they didn't fit, we make them fit,
> Whittling a language out of birch and pine.)[7]

These lines, in fact, set forth in colorful manner the way in which folk speech arises and, in some part, becomes a part of standard speech. People such as the earliest Americans about whom Benét writes

> find the resources of their language constantly taxed. They have no words for the many new objects on every hand or the constant succession of new experiences which they undergo. . . the colonists got a number of words they needed ready made from the languages of the Indians. They got some, too, from other languages. . . . More interesting, however, are the cases in which the colonist applied an old word to a slightly different thing. . . . The American early manifested the gift which he continues to show, the gift of the imaginative, slightly humorous phrase. To it we owe <u>to bark up the wrong tree</u>, <u>to face the music</u>, <u>fly off the handle</u>, <u>go on the war path</u>, <u>bury the hatchet</u>, <u>come out at the little end of the horn</u>, <u>saw wood</u>, and many more, with the breath of the country and sometimes of the frontier about them.[8]

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[6] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 3.

[7] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 4.

[8] Albert C. Baugh, <u>A History of the English Language</u> (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935), pp. 429-431.

The faculty which Benét has, of catching the spirit of a folk song or a folk tale and using it in a passage of his own creation, has been mentioned in the discussion of John Brown's Body. In the Prelude of Western Star, the same ability is exercised again, with the added skill of combining the feeling of several such bits of folklore into a unified whole. He has the transient pioneer sing:

> We're off for Californ-iay,
> We're off down the wild O-hi-o!
> And every girl on Natchez bluff
> Will cry as we go by-o!
> So when the gospel train pulls out
> And God calls "All aboard!"
> Will you be there with the Lord, brother,
> Will you be there with the Lord?
> Yes, I'll be there,
> Oh, I'll be there,
> I'll have crossed that rolling river in the morning![9]

The first lines reflect the phraseology of the immigrant trains, while the religious part of the passage is a combination of elements from campmeeting songs and Negro spirituals.

The vitality of the folk element in our lives, the part it plays in keeping the soul free of formalism and insulated from the dry-rot of cultural inhibitions, is indicated when Benét declares:

> And I have listened also, in my youth,
> And more than once or twice,
> To the trained speech, the excellent advice,

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[9] Benét, Western Star, pp. 4-5.

The clear, dramatic statement of advice,
And, after it was dumb,
Heard, like a spook, the curious echo come,
The echo of unkept and drawling mirth
--The lounging mirth of cracker-barrel men,
Snowed in by winter, spitting at the fire,
And telling the disreputable truth
With the sad eye that marks the perfect liar--
And, by that laughter, was set free again.[11]

In setting forth this philosophy, the statement itself is made in terms of the folk, in at least three different ways. The comparison of the formal to the folk is in the imagery, "heard, like a spook, the curious echo come," which makes use of the supernatural so typical of folk tales. The "cracker-barrel men, snowed in by winter, spitting at the fire," constitute a traditional popular setting in which folk materials originate and are perpetuated. Finally, the statement that the men are "telling the disreputable truth with the sad eye that marks the perfect liar" reflects the influence of that form of folk story which in America is known as the "tall tale."

Benét's symbol of the urge which sent men to the New World and on across it is the "western star;" and in revealing the illusory nature of much which that star promised, the author again has resource to folk expressions. Ill-fortune is the "doom arisen with the western star," and the star itself is termed "fool's silver of the

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[10] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

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Ibid., pp. 6-7.

sky."[11] The first of these phrases returns to the medium of the supernatural, and the second paraphrases the "fool's gold" designation for iron pyrites, the mineral which has raised false hopes for many an amateur prospector.

An interesting use of the experience of the westerner, lost on the parching desert, which includes the illusion of supernatural demoniac qualities in relentless nature, is made in a poetic passage on the essential loneliness of the human spirit:

> There is a wilderness we walk alone
> However well-companioned, and a place
> Where the dry wind blows over the dry bone
> And sunlight is a devil in the face,
> The sandstorm and the empty water-hole,[12]
> And the dead body, driven by its soul.

Possibly no folk custom is so colorful in the Southwest as the native dances of the Indian tribes. That custom serves as an image for Benét in describing the painful efforts of the pioneers of our country, and the way in which the reality of that past has slipped away from us:

> That sun-dance has been blotted from the map,
> Call as you will, those dancers will not come
> To tear their breasts upon the bloody strap,
> Mute visaged, to the passion of a drum,
> For some strange empire, nor the painted ghosts
> Speak from the smoke and summon up the hosts.[13]

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[11] Ibid., p. 7.

[12] Ibid., p. 7.

[13] Ibid., p. 8.

The western star is called a "will-o'-the-wisp that led the riflemen westward and westward,"[14] bringing in another supernatural folk concept. At last, with all frontiers gone, "the land fenced in, the golden apple won. . . old signal smokes grown meaningless at last,"[15] Benét sees the nation as following other stars. In these phrases picturing the disappearance of the western star, a variety of folk allusions is found--the classic quest for the golden apple, the signal smoke of the Indian, and the fencing of western land which led to range warfare.

The supernatural again finds expression, and the popular nickname for the Kentucky of wilderness days serves as a symbol, when the author asks,

> Why should one song go nosing like a hound
> After a phantom in a hunting shirt,
> Or mark again the dark and bloody ground. . . .[16]

In declaring the sources of his materials for Western Star, the poet ranges from the folk beliefs in supernatural properties of the "four elements" through the traditional peace-pipe ceremonies of the Indians to the folk expressions arising from the days of the wagon-train and from the ranching days when beasts "went loco." He says:

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[14] Ibid., p. 8.

[15] Ibid., p. 9.

[16] Ibid., p. 9.

I call
Straitly upon the Four,
Earth, Water, Fire, and Air,
Dark earth of exile, Earth, the Indian-giver,
Sun of the desert, Water of the great river,
And Air, that blows the painted leaves of Fall.
I blow my smoke the ceremonial ways.
I say the ways are open for the ghosts,
Open for rolling wagons and strong teams,
For the slow wheels of Conestoga carts,
Creaking like fate across the prairie days
. . . . . .
The lost, the eaters of the locoweed.
. . . . . .
I scatter the cornmeal for the great dead.[17]

The ancient and universal custom of providing food and equipment for the dead is reflected in the last line, with reference to "cornmeal" furnishing a typically American touch.

Benét seeks to recapture the spirit of

The vagrant music of ten thousand marches,
Common as dust, the gay, forsaken lilt
Twanged on a banjo and a frying pan,[18]

which typified the folk music of pioneer America. Envisioning the common man's dread of supposed terrors in the unknown western sea at the time of Columbus, he strives to see the story of America with the awe of the discoverer's sailors

When the Italian devil drove them on
Past all known land, into the utter seas,
Into the whirlpool, into nothingness
. . . . . .
To see before them there,
Neither the kraken nor the loadstone rock,

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[17] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[18] Ibid., p. 12.

But, thin with distance, thin but dead ahead,
The line of unimaginable coasts.[19]

The English Background

"Have you heard the news of Virginia?" Western Star is not divided into chapters or sections, but for the sake of convenience it will be desirable to deal with it in the parts into which it naturally falls. This, the first part, is concerned with the reactions with which England received word of the new world.

Two refrains lend to this section a flavor of the folk ballad. "There was a wind over England, and it blew,"[20] is repeated to indicate the strong, universal impact that the discoveries in America made upon the English mind. "Have you heard the news of Virginia?"[21] is the even more-recurrent refrain that drums unity into the development as it affected cavalier and puritan, rich merchant and apprentice, soldier and workingman.

The reports include the stories of the credulous who saw, among other tings, "the Triton swimming in Casco Bay,"[22] using a figure from classic myth.

Repeating the tall tales of mountains of gold, the

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[19] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[20] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[21] Ibid., pp. 17-22.

[22] Ibid., p. 18.

merchant is made to say, "Nay, I'm not to be coney-catched with the first, wild tale." He uses, in this declaration, a typical English folk expression of the day meaning "to be swindled." Still, he says, referring to traditional legend,

> . . . . Whittington sold his cat for a thousand pound,
> As we read, and am I a lesser man than he?
> Oh, hear Bow bells ring out for merchantmen,
> Turn again, Whittington,
> Turn again, Whittington,
> Thrice Lord Mayor of London![23]

Comment on the expeditions to Virginia makes use of classic mythology when it is said:

> The Earl hath a hand in the venture. . . .
> . . . . . .
> A very pious Aeneas in taffety,
> Trussed up to discover marvels. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Were there half the gold that he talks of--nay but half
> I could pull down Gullingdon Manor and build anew.
> I'd have boxwood walks and gods out of Italy
> And a masque with Hercules come out of a cloud
> --Nay, Jason rather--there is matter in Jason. . . .[24]

The place of Biblical expressions in folk speech of the devout is reflected in the reaction of dissenters: ". . . they mean to harry the sheep of God. . . . His elect must be steadfast. . . my heart is shaken with grace. . . . I have prayed and wrestled and drunk at the living fount. . . . God walks with me, guiding me with his hand."[25]

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[23] Ibid., p. 19.

[24] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

[25] Ibid., pp. 21-22.

The England of Elizabeth is hinted at in a passage on Dickon Heron. There is the outlier who "poached for . . . deer," and traditional food of Devon is mentioned in the allusion to having "heaped the cream on the saffron-cake."[26] The troubles of the pastry cook whose bills are ignored by the steward of the debt-ridden lord, the designation of London lads as "bold cocksparrows," and the cry of the prentices, "What d'ye lack?" are all from the folk experience and expressions of the times.[27] There are popular superstitions, prejudices and attitudes in the reaction to the Spaniard: "They smelt his brimstone and booed him on. . . Oh, the Popish varlet!"[28] Folk music has its place in the broadsheet:

> . . . the fine new ballad of Babes in the Wood,
> With the Merry Diversions of Madcap Awdrey,
> Half pure music, half naked bawdry.[29]

Folk tales are hinted at: ". . . his mother's tales, tales of a county of cream and curds. . . and the fresh, salt tang in the blowing air. . . a tingling ear. . . from a watchman's tale."[30] Dickon had

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[26] Ibid., p. 22.

[27] Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[28] Ibid., p. 24.

[29] Ibid., p. 24.

[30] Ibid., p. 25.

. . . dogged the heels
Of sailors home from a hundred keels
And heard, though the smoky tavern's roar,
The strange wave break on the stranger shore
Where tanned men quarreled over their lies. . . .[31]

The dialect of the Devon folk appears:

"Liddle sparrow--Dickon, my own.
Sea be master of Devon men.
Mind you of that when you'm man grown,
Liddle Dickon--Dickon, my wren."[32]

In the section introducing the Lanyard family, "lusty Mother Billington"[33] radiates the warmth of folk speech. As Rose is in childbirth, the old gossip philosophizes, "'Tis the way of the world in pear-time. Come, shake the tree!"[34] Rose, the Puritan, hopes she can convert the gross old woman. "Yea," she imagines in the Biblical phraseology of her kind, "even bring her humbly into the sheepfold."[35] Mother Billington, however, is not impressed with the earnest religion of the dissenters, and she expresses her attitude toward it with earthy imagery:

"There'll be less praising of God in a year or twain
When there's more noses to wipe."[36]

Smyth, Raleigh and Smith. Sir Thomas Smyth, surveying

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[31] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[32] Ibid., p. 25.

[33] Ibid., p. 28.

[34] Ibid., p. 28.

[35] Ibid., p. 30.

[36] Ibid., p. 31.

the prospects of settling Virginia where Sir Walter Raleigh had failed, sees Raleigh in terms of mythology, "the boy Apollo," and "a sort of demi-dragon of the Queen's. . . that would spit out fire and smoke, great plans, smart verses, idiot policies. . . ."[37] He regards his own abilities with supreme confidence:

> And, would they found a company to trade
> For unicorns, with double-headed men
> They'd come to me for backing. . . .[38]

Smyth sees such far-fetched schemes in terms of popular legend, just as he sees adventurers' expeditions for quickly-gotten treasure as forays for the rainbow's mythical "pot of gold."[39]

Superstitions are used, both as subject-matter and as figures of speech, in presenting the thought of Raleigh in the Tower. His captors had let him "play chemist and discover an elixir,"[40] and do almost anything else he wished, except have his freedom. Passersby gaze at his window, and tell each other that it is "atheist Raleigh--sold his soul to devils for a heap of heathen gold."[41] Envying the men who have the opportunity for the next

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[37] Ibid., p. 33.

[38] Ibid., p. 34.

[39] Ibid., p. 38.

[40] Ibid., p. 39.

[41] Ibid., p. 40.

attempt at colonizing Virginia, he declares that even "if they find the glory and the gold, my ghost has been before,"[42] He remembers his own ill-fated colonists.

> They died at Roanoke,
> Vanished as though the wood had taken them,
> In some wild Irish tale.[43]

Had he but his freedom and a ship or two, Raleigh thinks, he would even yet pour into the king's lap "the El Dorado's treasure."[44]

Young Percy, one of those whom the Virginia company was sending "to seek a phantom fortune in the West,"[45] is depicted as being amazed at the fantastic stories of Captain John Smith, also one of the company. Smith is characterized as "this chimera here before him":[46]

> Am I awake or dreaming? Is this voyage
> A voyage at all? I knew before he talked.
> But now I've nigh forgotten my own name.
> I sail with a chimera to the West.[47]

Smith, "this arrant creature with his vast mountain of tales," is drawn as the grandfather of all America's tall tale tellers,

> Who had been everywhere, been everything,
> (Or so he said) a prisoner of the Turk,
> (Or so he said) beggar in Muscovy,

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[42] Ibid., p. 40.

[43] Ibid., p. 40.

[44] Ibid., p. 41.

[45] Ibid., p. 42.

[46] Ibid., p. 43.

[47] Ibid., p. 44.

A paladin in Transylvania
(Or so he said), shipwrecked in twenty seas,
Lover of ladies in a dozen lands.[48]

Benét gives us, in fragmentary form, a sample of one of his tales:

"Aye.
When I had slain the second Turkish champion,
My sword being somewhat hacked, I rested on it
Perhaps the space a bell might toll a knell
And drank a cup of waters, while the Turks
Wailed for their slain most plaintively and loud.
Then there advanced the third--a lusty rogue,
Green-turbaned, their most skillful swordsman he,
And, as he rushed upon me--" said John Smith.[49]

The First Settlement

Jamestown vs. nature and the Indians. In that section devoted primarily to the founding of Jamestown, there is a diminishing amount of folk material, in comparison with the preceding parts of the book, and little that is used is typically American save for some references to the Indians.

And yet, a theme developed in this section is one of the most interesting in the book, because it conveys Benét's premonition that eventually--be it ever so long--civilization must fall before nature, and America itself will be a legend. Speaking of the first sight of the new land obtained by the Jamestown colonists, the poet says:

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[48] Ibid., p. 43.

[49] Ibid., p. 44.

We shall not see it as they, for no man shall
Till the end and ruin have come upon America,
The murmuring green forest, the huge god,
Smiling, cruel, lying at ease in the sun,
And neither smiling nor cruel, but uncaring. . . .[50]

And, having personified this force which he thinks may, in time, make our civilization a part of a forgotten folklore, he refers to it again and again. The spirit of the untamed, forested America which the colonists found is summed up as being

The green god, with leaves at his fingertips
And a wreath of oak and maple twining his brows,
Smiling, cruel, majestic and uncaring,
As he lies beside bright waters under the sun,
Whose blood is the Spring sap and the running streams,
Whose witchery is the fever of the marsh,
Whose bounty is sun and shadow and life and death,
The huge, wild god with the deerhorns and the green leaf.[51]

The first council which governed the colonists is called "the men who vexed the peace of the forest-god." Of Captain Gosnold, of the Goodspeed, it is said that "he will die within four months, at the touch of the forest-god." And, in the rapid succession of casualties suffered by the colony,

It was the stroke of the forest-god,
Sleepily vexed at last and pointing at them
The flame-tipped arrow of the August sun,
Weaving them round with vapors from the marsh,
Coming upon them in a cloud of small
Innumerable, buzzing, deadly wings,
In the river-slime, in the mud of the steaming river.[52]

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[50] Ibid., p. 49.

[51] Ibid., p. 50.

[52] Ibid., p. 62.

As it seems that the colony is well-nigh doomed, the poem assumes the form of a dirge:

> (. . . Toll the bell, forest-god.
> The brazen bell of the unbearable sky,
> For the fish are leaving the river, the grain is spent.
> Yet a little while and the forest will come again.
> Yet a little while and there will be no town.
> The green vine will grow through the logs of the ruined church.
> The possum roll on the drill-ground, with his children.
> In a little while--a green while--a forest while.)[53]

Classical mythology supplies the imagery in relating the incident of the sealed orders. The colonists en route to Virginia

> . . . carried a locked Pandora's box,
> Sure to make trouble, sealed orders from the Company,
> Naming a council of seven to rule the colony
> But not to be opened till they reached their goal.[54]

And, on their arrival, they "opened their Pandora's box and saw the names of their council--."[55]

The colonists found a people with little formal culture, Indians with only folk customs and arts:

> The riches. . . white shells and opossum skins,
> The scalp of a foe, the ritual of the clan,
> Squash-vine and pumpkin-seed and the deer's sinew
> And the yellow, life-giving corn.[56]

The Indians, after their first attack, "melted back,

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[53] Ibid., p. 65.

[54] Ibid., p. 48.

[55] Ibid., p. 51.

[56] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

like spirits, into the wood."[57] Once again, the figure of speech allies itself with folk song and story in adopting the supernatural beliefs of the people. The simple arts of the Indian are mentioned again in describing the Werowance of Rappahannock,

> --An Indian dandy, playing on a reed flute,
> Painted in crimson and blue, with a deer's hair crown--
> Oh, the fine, wild noise of the flute and the courtly
> savage![58]

The superstitions of the simple Indians in trying to understand the white man's guns are depicted:

> And the drums in the forest said, "We watch, we watch.
> They are white men with thundersticks but they are few."[59]

Benét swings abruptly to the modern, credulous folk belief in the theory that Mars is populated with some weird type of intelligent life--a belief which caused panic a few years ago when Orson Wells dramatized it in a radio broadcast. Speaking of the mistakes of the Jamestown colonists, he says,

> We would have known which Indians were friendly.
> (Let's hope we know as much of the Martians.)
> . . . . . .
> We'd have known the Martian birds and the Martian beasts
> And how to hunt them and trap them. We'd have known
> The ways of the Martian climate and all the ropes.
> In fact, we would have done wonders.[60]

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[57] Ibid., p. 51.

[58] Ibid., p. 55.

[59] Ibid., p. 55.

[60] Ibid., p. 56.

Thus, in terms of superstition, does Benét brush away with one clean sweep the criticism of the errors of Jamestown's colonists, facing a new situation.

Balladeers. An interesting sidelight is the incident of the East India Company employing a third-rate poet to write, in miserable doggerel, a ballad to be sung on the streets, in praise of Virginia--a song with which the ballad singers would entice more people to sail for the new world. It was miserable verse, but "it would do for the ballad-singers/And they got people talking."[61]

The ballad which Benét has created, beginning, "Oh, have you heard the gallant news,"[62] is in the spirit of actual ballads of the day. For example, the passage promising that

> There's heaps of gold and precious stones
> So easy to be found,

is reminiscent of an actual ballad which listed as resources of Virginia,

> Great ftore of Fowle, of Venison,
> of Grapes, and Mulberries,
> Of Chefnuts, Walnuts and fuch like,
> of fruits and Strawberries,
> There is indeed no want at all:
> . . . . . .
> Fures, Sturgeon, Cauiare,
> Blacke-walnut-tree, and fome deale-boords,
> with fuch they laden are:

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[61] Ibid., p. 58.

[62] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

Some Pearle, fome Wainfcot and clapbords,
with fome Saffafras wood:
And Iron promift, for tis true,
their Mynes are very good.[63]

The ballad cited even has as its title a phrase similar to the first line of Benét's--"Newes from Virginia."

The riches of Virginia are such, in Benét's ballad,

That every man may justly say
"This is Tom Tiddler's Ground."

The allusion is to an old folk game of England, known variously as Tom Ticker's, Tiddler's or Tinker's ground. It is described as follows:

> A line is drawn on the ground, one player stands behind it. The piece so protected is "Tom Tiddler's ground." The other players stand in a row on the other side. The row breaks, and the children run over, calling out "Here we are on Tom Tiddler's ground, picking up gold and silver." Tom Tiddler catches them, and as they are caught they stand on one side. The last out becomes Tom Tiddler.[64]

The same source quotes a British journal for the full text of the words which the children recite as they try to avoid capture:

I'm on Tom Tinker's ground,
I'm on Tom Tinker's ground,
I'm on Tom Tinker's ground,
Picking up gold and silver.[65]

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[63] R. Rich, Newes From Virginia [1610] (New York: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1937.) Pages not numbered.

[64] Joseph Wright, editor, The English Dialect Dictionary, 6 vols. (Oxford: Henry Froude, 1905.)

[65] Folklore Journal, I, 386, as quoted by The English Dialect Dictionary.

The plea for water by the dying men of Jamestown, verging into delirium, is the same sort of thing which has produced some of our more interesting folksongs. One of the more recent in this manner, "Cool Water," is in thought almost a repetition of Benét's work here, with the main difference being a desert setting instead of a fever swamp.

Superstitions and tall tales. Folk superstitions are echoed in the grim watch of the dying colonists for the red "devils of the wood."[66] A common phrase bandied about in our folk speech finds a place when Benét mentions

> The picture we see in childhood, in the books,
> Where the treacherous redskins always bite the dust.[67]

The wars of the natives are referred to as "Lost Iliads of the forest."[68] In this new country, the leaves are made to whisper of "magic all around you."[69]

Classical mythology supplies the figure of speech when it is said that George Percy is "not this skin-changing stepchild of Ulysses"[70] which Captain John Smith is. All his successors in the telling of the tall tale are referred to as "the stepchildren of Ulysses," and Smith

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[66] Benét, Western Star, p. 68.

[67] Ibid., pp. 69-70.

[68] Ibid., p. 70.

[69] Ibid., p. 70.

[70] Ibid., p. 72.

himself is called, again, a "chimera."[71] Also from the classic is the description of Pocahontas' maidens, with deerhorns on their head, as "a Bacchant rout."[72]

To indicate the passage of time, Benét uses a device modeled on nursery rhymes of the "hickory-dickory-dock" type. In three separate passages the "tick-tock, tick-tock" refrain is mingled with short, "ticking" lines telling of the inducements which the New World held out in the way of supposed riches, and religious freedom. The attraction of hoped-for wealth is expressed in the terms of popular superstition:

> There are riches oversea,
> Land and riches oversea,
> And a witch is oversea
> Weaving subtle spells.
> Tick-tock,
> Tick-tock,
> Many men have died.
> Many men will die again,
> Try again, die again,
> Yet the bold will vie again
> For the witch's promises,
> Promises, promises,
> Gold and silver promises
> Wrapped in adder's hide.
> Tick-tock.[73]

The religious element in folk speech is touched on again in a side-glance at the Lanyard family. Matthew Lanyard's wife, Rose, has died, and the event leads him

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[71] Ibid., p. 73.

[72] Ibid., p. 74.

[73] Ibid., pp. 80-81.

to contemplate with intense interest the future life. His thoughts are of "Jerusalem, pure spotless city of the ransomed saints," and of "the white lamb, Christ."[74]

As Matthew prepares to marry Katharine, the dour elder sister of Rose, so his little daughter may have a mother, Mother Billington, the neighbor realizes that this will not be a gay wedding--"No stealing of bride's garters with Miss Precise."[75] But she turns to her own family's affairs. Her son has married, and her expectancy of grandchildren is put in the form of a folk song:

> "When 'tis cherry ripe," she hummed, "there'll be cherry pie
> And the bold young rogue had ever a taking way. . ."[76]

The Colonists Become Established

Dickon Heron. The narrative turns, for a considerable time, to the fortunes of Dickon Heron. The lad is chosen as a servant by Sir Gilbert Hay, who is bound for Virginia. Hay, it is noted, once came to the Queen's attention through his interest in the mythological character Achilles, which led him to play the part in a masque.[77]

Dickon sees on the street the renowned Virginia

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[74] Ibid., p. 84.

[75] Ibid., p. 84.

[76] Ibid., p. 85.

[77] Ibid., p. 87.

captain, John Smith. The captain's tendency to tell tall tails is recognized again when it is said that he was "Limping the street like a walking myth."[78] But, to Smith, the possibilities of Virginia are still great. In Biblical language, the captain declares that

> . . . the land was a very Palestine,
> Ready to flow with oil and wine
> Would they send but workers over the brine,
> A prize, a Canaan, a promised land![79]

Heron's new employment as a body-servant did not sit well, and a growing desire to be his own master "jigged in his head like a ballad-rhyme."[80]

The narrative turns for a moment to the Lanyards. The little daughter of the Puritan family being reared strictly, wasn't allowed to "hear about elves and hangings from Mother Billington."[81]

Dickon Heron, in Virginia for three years, faced the knowledge that he liked his life and his new freedon--"it stared in his face like woman or ghost."[82] He is joined by his fellow-apprentice, Jack Blount, and Jack's sister, Alice, After Jack's untimely death, Dickon

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[78] Ibid., p. 89.

[79] Ibid., p. 89.

[80] Ibid., p. 92.

[81] Ibid., p. 104.

[82] Ibid., p. 108.

marries Alice, principally because in no other way could he protect her properly. In the company of rough colonists, her innocence would be an easy prey:

> ". . . her heart is good--
> And, to her, 'tis the ballad of Babes in the Wood,
> Which I would to God I had never heard."[83]

Marriage in Virginia was quite different from what it would have been in London, where Love was "a ballad-singer in scarlet hose."[84]

The Jamestown English

> . . . ate the white corn-kernels, parched in the sun
> And they knew it not, but they'd not be English again.[85]

The eating of Indian corn is used as a symbol of the essential difference in American life which made the colonists American, not English. The figure of speech is akin to a mass of superstitions in regard to the supernatural change brought about by eating strange foods or performing certain acts. In this category is the saying that he who drinks Nile water will return; also the belief that if the departing visitor to Hawaii throws his flower lei on the water and it floats to the beach, he will return to the Islands. The outstanding example is the power which Pluto gained over Prosperine, after the maiden sucked juice from

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[83] Ibid., p. 110.

[84] Ibid., p. 112.

[85] Ibid., p. 116.

the pomegranate seeds.[86]

Among the varied kinds of people who went to colonize Virginia--many of them to die--Benét notes that some were convicted vagrants, who

> . . . marched to the ships through a jeering crowd,
> While the fifes played, "Through the wood, laddie."[87]

The administrative ability of Lord Delaware, sent as governor to Virginia is indicated in an old folk expression:

> . . . the new broom
> That means to sweep the dust from the room.[88]

John Rolfe, preparing to marry Pocahontas, gauges his feeling toward her in a Biblical term which has entered the folk speech of the religious--"Feeling his heart unto her most strangely moved."[89]

Matthew Lanyard. That section of the poem which deals largely with the removal of the Lanyard family to America opens, quite appropriately, with a hymn. The religious song is of Benét's own composition, but it is woven with many expressions common to religious people in Elizabethan times. Its lines sound like an echo of many other Christian hymns:

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[86] Thomas Bullfinch, The Age of Fable [1855] (Boston: S. W. Tilton and Company, 1881), p. 69.

[87] Ibid., p. 117.

[88] Ibid., p. 97.

[89] Ibid., p. 119.

O God, the refuge of our fears,
Our buckler and our stay,
Within whose sight the rolling years
Are but a single day,
Behold us now, like Israel's band,
Cast forth upon the wave,
And may Thy strong and aweful hand
Be still outstretched to save![90]

A continuation of the hymn, a few pages later, contains a line from Rich's ballad on Virginia. Where Rich wrote,

Wee hope to plant a Nation
where none before hath ftood,[91]

Benét ended his hymn,

And build the Zion of His will,
Where none hath stood before.[92]

That branch of folklore which deals with buried treasure is the theme of the passage in which the Puritans, in New England, find a store of Indian corn.

They were busy digging.
Have you ever dug in the earth and found something hidden?
Penny or corn or pearl, it is all the same.
It is treasure trove, it is the gift of the ground.[93]

But it is mainly the brand of folk speech which is promoted by much study of religion that typifies the Puritans. When they bring in the corn and other items the Indians have left, it is with "the pride of all hunters, from Nimrod on."[94]

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[90] Ibid., p. 119.

[91] Rich, op. cit. (Pages not numbered).

[92] Benét, Western Star, p. 122.

[93] Ibid., p. 137.

[94] Ibid., p. 139.

The supernatural sets the tone for a number of lines telling how the Puritans found everywhere traces of "Somebody," but how "Somebody" always seemed to have slipped away just ahead of them.[95] And the overtones of old, mysterious legend are felt when they find the grave of a yellow-haired man there in the wilderness, buried near the bones of an Indian child.[96]

The ingrained Biblical speech crops out in the song on the building of "Zion."[97] It is immediately followed, as if in contrast, by lines telling of

> The long slow torment of the northern god,
> The god of the Norther and the knife of stone,
> The god with the gull's beak, dipping it in their hearts.[98]

A new land. Most of Western Star tells of preparations and beginnings. The last part of the book deals with the firm establishment of the colonies. The ballad of Morgan, relating the story of the Indian war with Ophechancanough, is as truly in the ballad form as any of the many which Benét has written of this type. In physical form, narrative nature, dialogue and parallelisms, it is the genuine ballad type.[99]

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[95] Ibid., pp. 137-143.

[96] Ibid., p. 140.

[97] Ibid., p. 145.

[98] Ibid., p. 145.

[99] Ibid., pp. 152-156.

Full of folklore is the dream which brings to Dickon Heron a premonition of death. Elements in it include the apparition of the long-dead mother, and that of dead Sir Gilbert Hay; the "sea-thing, cold and brave," from Merman's Town; the "faint, thin crying that was something living and something dying"; and, finally, the vision of the word "Croatan" blazed on a tree, symbolizing the disappearance of the ill-fated first colony.[100]

The Puritans, in the opinion of Matthew Lanyard, are established "with God before us like a walking cloud,"[101] The expression reflects the Biblical conception of a pillar of cloud by day, of fire by night.

The hanging of Jacky Billington, and the vigil of his mother, is a Plymouth version of the Rizpah story, a legend of Israel which must have been familiar folk knowledge in that Puritan colony. Rizpah, when her sons had been hanged to wipe out the blood-debt which the house of Saul owed to Gibeon, "suffered neither the birds of the air to rest upon them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night."[102] Mother Billington acted in the same capacity:

> I had a son and ye've strung him up on a rope
> And 'a dangles there like a mawkin--poor, pretty Jack,

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[100] Ibid., pp. 156-158.

[101] Ibid., p. 170.

[102] II Samuel (Authorized Version) 21:10.

With his neck as long as a goose's neck, poor lad!
And yet, I'll keep him company. . . .
. . . . . .
. . . the crows will pyke at his eyes.
They'll be fine, fat bits for the crows, so I must bide. . .
. . . . . .
. . . be patient now.
For your old mother is waiting. She'll scare the crows.[103]
She'll keep the crows from you face, poor Jacky boy. . . .

Also from Biblical tradition comes the reference to David and Goliath which the Puritan Henry Shenton uses in telling of his youthful encounter with the butcher's boy. From another type of folklore, however, comes the allusion that shows him to be the human, tolerant type of Puritan--the kind who helped Roger Williams found Rhode Island. He was fond of reading, in his boyhood, many kinds of books, among them "a silly book--The Tale of Robin Hood and yet I loved it. . . ."[104]

Evaluation

The dominant feeling produced by Western Star is that in this poem Stephen Benét has used folk materials largely to serve as symbolism. It can be used for many other purposes, and indeed in this same poem it is, but symbolism still is one of the chief purposes here.

Folklore can be introduced for more effective characterization, for the creation of a more genuine background

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[103] Benét, Western Star, pp. 172-173.

[104] Ibid., p. 178.

and for sharpening the mood or emotional effect. The first of these uses is seen in the portrayal of Dickon Heron, the second in the supernatural attributes of the Virginia god of the forest, and the third in the Puritan search for an elusive "Somebody."

These assume a minor role, however, beside the symbolic use of folklore. The symbolism can be indicated by a few illustrations. The very title of the work, and the numerous references in the Prelude to the western star, depend on the supernatural control of the stars over human destiny, a conception which is even yet held by the more credulous. So, the star becomes a symbol of the restlessness which, arising out of diverse conditions, caused men to move ever westward during the colonization and expansion days of America.

The ghost in many of its variations is used as a symbol of the past. Whether Benét is referring to the ghosts of long-dead sun-dancers or to the phantoms of those first pushed into the "dark and bloody ground," he is identifying the ghost with a past that will not come again.

One of the most poignant bits of symbolism is the inclusion of Mother Billington in the dour Puritan colony. She is not just a woman, an interesting character, a mother keeping vigil over her hanged son. She is "Merry

England," a gaiety and tolerance which the Puritans have put behind them. The contrast which she provides to their stern spiritual purpose symbolizes effectively the sort of life which they will not tolerate. And the extent of their lack of tolerance is symbolized in their hanging of her son, leaving her with all good nature wrung out, capable only of grief. The folklore and folk speech of Mother Billington serve their purpose well in building up the character for this sharply-drawn symbolism.

In addition to the use of folklore to symbolize the ideas which control Western Star, there is a major dependence on folklore to show early America as an outgrowth of certain very human motives in Elizabethan England. This aspect was noted in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. The roots of American culture are very definitely shown to be in England, even though they were conditioned early and remarkably by conditions in the New World.

Benét, in this book, has shown a thorough knowledge of folk materials. His knowledge is all the more remarkable since it called for a thorough study of Elizabethan times which were not as close at hand as the folk materials which went into John Brown's Body. It would have been easy, under the circumstances, to fall into mere antiquarianism. To Benét's credit, the work has the appearance of breathing, pulsing life.

CHAPTER IV

SHORTER POEMS

In preceding chapters, Benét's poems have been examined from several points of view. They have been scanned for the awareness which Benét exhibits toward folk materials, and for the conscious purpose with which he has introduced such materials into his poetry. They have been analyzed for the national or racial sources of the folklore, for the variety of types of folk materials used, and for the effectiveness of their application to Benét's characters--individually and as groups. And finally, in Western Star, an examination has been made section-by-section to demonstrate the manner in which the folk element is introduced.

In this chapter, the shorter poems will be covered to show how Benét uses folk materials in three ways: (1) by depicting folklore of the past, primarily for values inherent in such folklore as a subject for literature; (2) by using folklore to reveal aspects of the present, either traits in the poet's own personality, or conditions of his environment as he sees them; and (3) by presenting his concept of the folklore of the future.

The phrase, "folklore of the future," may call for an explanation. Benét had a sense of the continuity of

mankind, from generation to generation. Just as he saw that the activities of yesterday's life have become today's folklore, just so did he visualize the events of the present fading into the legend of the future. With this conception firmly ingrained, he could and often did take a mental point of view somewhere in the future and look backward upon the present.

The Past

Folk materials of the past, as found in these poems, are not all of one type. There is, of course, the folklore taken directly from the heritage of song and legend--Captain Kidd, Johnny Appleseed, the Negro spirituals and so on. A second type is the legend which Benét builds around a historical personage, the folk element here consisting of the pseudo-legendary nature of the incident. A third type is the legend which is spun around characters of Benét's own creation.

It is difficult to be certain just what falls into the third category, because there are some characters he depicts who may or may not have actually lived. Captain Hawk and Christopher Hew, for example, are given as the names of pirates in "The Hemp" and "Moon-Island," respectively. The former poem is sub-titled "A Virginia Legend," and the latter "Deposition of Christopher Hew,

the Last American Pirate." Phrases such as these suggest strongly a basis in fact, yet none of the standard chronicles lists the names. There is a possibility that they were suggested to Benét's mind by Hawkins and by the Rhode Island pirates, George Dew and Thomas Tew. Since a possibility for error exists in classifying these uncertain examples, all those not known to be actual persons or recognized figures of genuine folklore are placed in the third category for the sake of consistency.

Actual folk materials. Actual folklore is included in a variety of ways. Many of the most interesting examples are in A Book of Americans, which Stephen Vincent Benét wrote in collaboration with his wife, Rosemary Carr Benét. This book is intended primarily for children, as evidenced by its dedication to the poet's children, and by the simplicity of approach throughout. With their audience in mind, the writers do not use folklore in a straight-forward manner which a more sophisticated audience would accept with no confusion, no danger of accepting the legend as fact. Neither do the Benéts, because of the immaturity of their readers, deprive the book of the romance provided by untrue or slightly true legend. Their solution is to use the popular tale, but to treat it with a spirit of banter, of questioning, of raised eyebrow. This

treatment is seen in "Aaron Burr";[1]

> And there he planned a deed of night
> --Or else, perhaps, it wasn't quite--
> A dire and deadly, doleful plot
> --Though some historians think not.
> . . . . . .
> It was a fearful, fearful deed
> (But <u>what</u> it was, finds few agreed)

The same manner is used in telling of the legends of Captain Kidd's buried gold.[2] In the writing of "Captain Kidd" there is injected, moreover, personal opinion which sets itself up against the debunking of myth, on a whimsical rather than a rational basis:

> They say he never buried gold.
> <u>I think, perhaps, he did</u>.
>
> They say it's all a story that
> His favorite little song
> Was "Make these lubbers walk the plank!"
> <u>I think, perhaps, they're wrong</u>.
>
> They say he never pirated
> . . . . . .
> --<u>But I don't like his looks</u>!

Witchcraft is brought to the front vividly in "Cotton Mather,"[3] but the poem makes clear to its young readers that such beliefs were the product of superstitious times and over-stimulated imgainations:

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[1] Rosemary Benét and Stephen Vincent Benét, <u>A Book of Americans</u> (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933), p. 44.

[2] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 25.

[3] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 23.

Grim Cotton Mather
Was always seeing witches,
Daylight, moonlight,
They buzzed about his head,
Pinching him and plaguing him
With aches and pains and stitches,
Witches in his pulpit,
Witches in his bed.

Nowadays, nowadays,
We'd say that he was crazy,
But everyone believed him
In old Salem town. . . .

An outstanding exception to this mode of treatment is found in "Johnny Appleseed,"[4] in which the legendary Johnny Appleseed is described convincingly, with no light handling to indicate that the real person was a prosperous nurseryman. We are told that

The winds of the prairie
Might blow through his rags,
But he carried his seeds
In the best deerskin bags.
. . . . . .
He nested with owl,
And with bear-cub and possum,
. . . . . .
Why did he do it?
We do not know.

The Benéts hint at one of the oldest legends to which America is heir, when in "Christopher Columbus"[5] they write:

But Columbus was bold and Columbus set sail
(Thanks to Queen Isabella, her pelf)

The tradition that the queen placed her jewels at the

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[4] Ibid., p. 47.

[5] Ibid., p. 3.

disposal of the expedition in order to guarantee financial backing is so well rooted in this country that the Portuguese residents of California, in a dramatic service on the Feast of the Holy Ghost Whitsunday, represent Isabella as taking her jewels and laying them on the altar. In the ceremony, the queen of the fiesta represents Isabella. She wears what appear to be priceless jewels, but which in reality are imitations. The scene is climaxed by removing the paste gems, and placing them on the altar. The tradition of Isabella's offer to finance Columbus' voyage by sale of her personal ornaments appears, however, to have no basis in fact.

> The story that Queen Isabella, to win the consent of the Court for the great undertaking, offered to sell her jewels, seems to be one of those bits of pure romance that so often creep into the historical narrative and lend fictitious color to it.[6]

With the spirit of humorous scepticism which marks the attitude toward much of the folklore in the book, "Christopher Columbus" continues:

> There were monsters, of course, every watery mile,
> Great krakens with blubbery lips
> And sea-serpents smiling a crocodile-smile
> As they waited for poor little ships.
>
> There were whirlpools and maelstroms, without any doubt

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[6] Clark Wissler, Constance Lindsay Skinner, and William Wood, Adventures in the Wilderness (Vol. I, Ralph Henry Gabriel, editor, The Pageant of America, 15 vols.), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925-1929, p. 102.

And tornadoes of lava and ink
(Which, as nobody yet had been there to find out,
Seems a little bit odd, don't you think?)

Odd or not, it was a part of genuine folk belief in the late fifteenth century:

> Out beyond its horizon line, luring though that might be, this Sea of Darkness was held to be the home of weird monsters that dragged down ships, a place of thick and noisome vapors that strangled men and forever blew their thin ghosts about, lost wanderers in a chill and supernatural fog.[7]

Actual folk materials are used sparingly in several other poetic sketches in A Book of Americans. In "Jesse James,"[8] a line from the folk song, "Frankie and Johnny," is borrowed when his friends are made to say, "They done him wrong when he was young." In "Sam Houston,"[9] the Texas hero's honor is said to be "bright as a bowie." The bowie was a type of hunting knife, named for a Southwestern frontiersman, and was the product of a widespread folk art in the southwestern United States in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In "John Paul Jones,"[10] Jones is made to claim kinship with the mythical Davy Jones when he says:

They shall fish my cousin, Davy, from his sea-horse-guarded thrones
Ere they blot my daring topsails from the sky!

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[7] Ibid., p. 88.

[8] Benét, A Book of Americans, p. 97.

[9] Ibid., p. 71.

[10] Ibid., p. 31.

Somewhat more actual folklore is used in the "Ode to Walt Whitman,"[11] published in Burning City. Benét recalls the tales of buffalo hunting, when the buffaloes' tongues were cut out by the hunter, and in relating the death of Whitman asks:

> Oh, singing tongue!
> Great tongue of bronze and salt and the free grasses,
> Tongue of America, speaking for the first time,
> Must the hunter have you at last?

Whitman is declared to be "still the giant lode we quarry. . . still the trail-breaker, still the rolling river." The final words of the description are, of course, direct from an American folk song. Enlarging on the theme of the river as it typifies Whitman and America, Benét refers to the legend of America's past when he says the water flows

> Over the rotted deer-horn
> The gold, Spanish money,
> The long-rusted iron of many undertakings. . . .

The spirit of the frontier is sought when Benét devotes an entire poem to an individual in whom folklore can be almost personified. That is "The Ballad of William Sycamore,"[12] in Tiger Joy. Despite failure to find any historical reference to the subject of this poem, we may

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[11] Stephen Vincent Benét, Burning City (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), p. 26.

[12] Stephen Vincent Benét, Tiger Joy (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925), pp. 13-16.

conclude that he was an actual person since the dates of birth and death (1790-1871) are given under the title. Examination of Benét's other poems indicates that this is invariably done when the subject is an actual person. "The Ballad of William Sycamore" sums up the story of the frontiersman, which in large part is the story of America's folklore. In many respects, the character of the poem, who tells his life in the first person, is in the same tradition as Cooper's Natty Bumppo. He is born and reared on the frontier, and follows the frontier westward to the plains, ever fleeing the encroachment of civilization.

> But I could not live when they fenced the land,
> For it broke my heart to see it.

From Leatherstocking to his more recent descendant who sings "Don't Fence Me In," these lines express the pioneer's desire for elbow room. Like Natty Bumppo, William Sycamore has "a redskin nose to unravel / Each forest sign. . . ." Like the hero of Cooper's novels, he is close to the violence of frontier times. His sons were killed in battles.

> The eldest died at the Alamo.
> The youngest fell with Custer.

Benét identifies the spirit of William Sycamore, which is the spirit of frontier America, with the soil. He implies that the attitudes of traditional America are still living with those who are close to the earth, and not warped by

machine civilization:

> Now I lie in the heart of the fat, black soil,
> Like the seed of a prairie thistle;
> . . . . . .
> And my youth returns, like the rains of Spring,
> And my sons, like the wide-geese flying

Various types of folk materials are reflected in the poem, through references to coon-skin caps, log cabins, long squirrel rifles, powder horns and hunting shirts. The fiddle music "like a foggy song" (recalling "Foggy, Foggy Dew") and the square dance calls, together with the allusion to "Money Musk" all depend for the effect on the tradition of mountain folk music. The dried herbs over the door are a folk practice, and the statement that "I sowed my sons like the apple-seed" recalls the folk legend of Johnny Appleseed.

A character portrayal depending as heavily on folk materials, but of a different kind, is "King David."[13] Not only the story of David and Bathsheba, but the phraseology of the King James Version which adds to the effectiveness of Benét's poem, is a part of the folk consciousness of Protestant Americans. It is like an echo of a century and a half of Sunday school teachers when Benét weaves into his poems such expressions as "The Lord God is a jealous God!. . . Blest be the Lord. . . poor ewe-lamb. . . My sin has found me!. . . cleansed and anointed."

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[13] Ibid., pp. 69-79.

The greatest use of folk elements is not in the poems about persons, but rather in those poems in which Benét takes for his subject a situation closely related to folklore. It is very natural, for example, that in "Southern Ships and Settlers,"[14] the ballad-conscious seventeenth-century emigrants from England should be described in a verse-form which borrows the dialogue element from the English ballad. "O, where are you going, 'Godspeed' and 'Discovery,'" begins a series of questions which the ships and settlers answer to tell the narrative. In a final chorus by all, they say "We're. . . the bread on the waters," using an expression which is Biblical.

From Benét's Selected Works, "American Names"[15] can be cited as a poem leaning heavily on folklore--that branch which records colorful, distinctive names. A conscious attempt is made to still further identify the names themselves with the folk consciousness, in such phrases as "snakeskin titles of mining claims. The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat. . . the bullet towns of Calamity Jane." Such names as Deadwood, Lost Mule Flat,

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[14] Benét, A Book of Americans, p. 20.

[15] Stephen Vincent Benét, Ballads and Poems (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1931), p. 3.

Skunktown Plain, Painted Post and Wounded Knee are used in the poem. Benét's affection for the homely flavor of such names and places, and their people, is seen in the stanza which goes:

> I will fall in love with a Salem tree
> And a rawhide quirt from Santa Cruz,
> I will get me a bottle of Boston sea
> And a blue-gum nigger to sing me blues.
> I am tired of loving a foreign muse.

"Western Wagons"[16] reflects the traditions of the great westward movement. The popular song of the day, "Oh, Susanna," is heard in Benét's lines,

> With banjo and with frying pan--Susanna, don't you cry!
> For I'm off the California to get rich out there or die!

And from the same source, folk song, is the line, "Over the hills in legions, boys."

The suggestion of a specific spiritual, "Little David, Play on Your Harp," is contained in lines from "Negro Spirituals"[17] which say

> And David's hands are dusky hands,
> And David's harp was gold.

Mountain fiddle music, not that of the ballads but the old square dance tunes, is the theme of "The Mountain Whippoorwill."[18] Benét builds a background for his mountain fiddler with folk customs and expressions such

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[16] Benét, A Book of Americans, p. 72.

[17] Ibid., p. 85.

[18] Benét, Tiger Joy, pp. 27-34.

as "Don't want nuthin' and never got it yet," "Lazy as an old houn' dog," "Raised runnin' ragged thu' the cockle-burrs," "Never had a mammy to teach me pretty-please," "fiddle down a possum," "no-count," "fair-to-middlers," and "stood up pert." Then, in the fiddlers' contest scene, he weaves into his poetry the names of and allusions to such titles as "Turkey in the Straw," "Hell's Broke Loose in Georgia," the spiritual "Go Down Moses," and "Pop Goes the Weasel." In this scene, his erratic, irrational, colorful lines achieve the genuine effect of the fiddle music which he is describing. He uses fragments of square dance calls, and words similar to the ecstatic lyrics of such tunes. A few lines show the movement:

> Swing yore partners--up an' down the middle!
> Sashay now--oh, listen to that fiddle!
> . . . . . .
> Rabbit in the pea-patch, possum in the pot,
> Try an' stop my fiddle, now my fiddle's gettin' hot!

Legends created around actual characters. In the second type of folklore of the past, Benét takes actual historical characters and creates legends about them. The poems may be otherwise highly literary in all respect, but the myth-creation characteristic is one which links them to his poetry which is more recognizably folklore. For example, in "The General Public"[19] Benét takes the poor

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[19] Benét, Ballads and Poems, p. 135.

social adjustment of the youthful Shelley, and creates a scene in which he is pelted with mud by the other boys. In "Alexander the Sixth Dines With the Cardinal of Capua,"[20] Benét builds up dramatically the scene of a Borgia poisoning.

The superstition that comets mark deaths of the great is used in "Alexander Hamilton,"[21] in which after Hamilton's death his widow says, "There's a comet bright in the skies tonight."

But of all the actual characters for whom folk legend is invented, Daniel Boone probably benefits most from Benét's talent. In the poem of that name,[22] the effectiveness of Benét's handling of folk materials is at its peak in the four short lines to which the poem is limited:

> When Daniel Boone goes by, at night,
> The phantom deer arise
> And all lost, wild America
> Is burning in their eyes.

"Composites" of Benét's creation. Four examples may be given of the third category of folklore of the past--the type in which legend is created around imaginary characters. This sort of thing utilizes Benét's capacity for

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[20] Ibid., p. 58.

[21] Benét, A Book of Americans, p. 42.

[22] Ibid., p. 67.

taking the phraseology and spirit of much varied folklore and combining it into a composite with all the romance of folklore and all the satisfaction of art. This capacity is exhibited throughout John Brown's Body and Western Star, in the spirituals, ballads and hymns which have the feel of genuine folk songs, but which in reality are composites.

"Three Days Ride"[23] is one of this group of poems with the flavor of folklore built around fictitious characters. It has many elements of the English ballad, including the narrative nature, the refrain, the hopeless love with death of the lovers, and the cruel brothers.

"The Innovator,"[24] farther from the folk in external form, nevertheless has the element of the supernatural in making the narrator a pharaoh long-dead; it has the very definite nature of fantasy; and it represents pseudo-myth-making.

Fantasy at its height is represented in "Moon-Island,"[25] The framework is a pirate story, a theme which in itself is typical of folk legend, but the heart of the poem is the fantastic conception of a pirate crew who thought they had murdered the moon, personified in a "moon maiden." The maiden materializes when a

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[23] Benét, Ballads and Poems, p. 61.

[24] Ibid., p. 137.

[25] Benét, Tiger Joy, pp. 35-43.

"Moonvine" growing from moonshaped seeds reaches up to pull down the moon, which thereupon changes into a girl.

"The Hemp,"[26] which is termed a Virginia legend, also appears to be a composite creation of Benét's mind, but he has drawn heavily on genuine pirate folklore to make it appear a real legend. It is the story of a baronet who grew on his own lands the hemp for rope to hang the pirate who had violated and killed his daughter. The poem contains all the elements of pirate lore--the stripping and burning of merchant ships, and the captives walking the plank. The planting of hemp at the edge of the marsh is considered "voodoo work" by the Negro slaves. The poem includes the inevitable boarding party at the final fight, the slashing of cutlasses, and the final hanging of the pirate to his own yard-arm. The poem uses a refrain, varying from stanza to stanza but nearly always beginning, "But down by the marsh--."

The Present

Three aspects of the present are portrayed with the assistance of folk materials. One is the mind of the poet himself; a second is the appearance of other individuals as Benét sees them; and the third is the world about him--its problems, hopes and fears.

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[26] Ibid., pp. 18-26.

The poet himself. In the first group, the poem "Hands"[27] represents the poet in terms of his own hands which, he says, are

> Base mechanics at the most
> That have sometimes touched a ghost.

He reveals his personal disappointment in the impersonality of departed spirits when he writes, in "Bad Dream,"[28]

> I saw the soul arise,
> Naked, shaped like a blade,
> Free, inhuman and bright. . .
> . . . . . .
> It had forgotten the grief,
> The long pain and the brief
> The daybreak, the burning night. . .
> . . . . . .
> It is this I cannot forgive,
> It is thus they answer our love
> When they are gone from the earth.

His belief that there is an existence after death in which the spirit receives its just deserts is seen in "Poor Devil,"[29] the monologue of a suicide who leaves life in search of oblivion. In a ghostly recital after death, the character tells how, in a supernatural manner, he saw on the floor

> My huddled body lying there--and awe
> Swept over me. I trembled--and looked up.
> Above me was--not that, my heart's desire,
> The small and dark abode of death and peace--
> But all from which I sought a vain release!

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[27] Benét, Ballads and Poems, p. 179.

[28] Ibid., p. 190.

[29] Ibid., p. 153.

The dual nature of the mind is portrayed, in "The Breaking Point,"[30] by fairyland phraseology:

> --The grass began to whisper things--
> And every tree became an elf,
> That grinned and chuckled counselings:
> Birds, beast, one thing alone they said,
> Beating and dinning at my head.

"The Golden Corpse,"[31] a series of sonnets on the meaning of life, finds Benét lamenting his lost youth. Using the supernatural terms of mythology, he says that "It was a stallion, trampling the skies." It was "the hidden ghost." "Men that dig up a mandrake know disease," he says, expressing a feeling that the past of his life should lie buried. But, he adds, the formalities which succeed youth's wild enthusiams have their merits:

> And there are sorceries more excellent
> Than the first conflagration of the dust.

The use of sorcery as a figure of speech enters again in "Difference,"[32] Attempting to appraise himself, Benét says,

> My mind's a map. A mad sea-captain drew it
> Under a flowing moon until he knew it;
> . . . . . .
> Here is the strait where eyeless fishes swim
> About their buried idol, drowned so cold
> He weeps away his eyes in salt and gold.
> A country like the dark side of the moon,
> A cider-apple country, harsh and boon,
> A country savage as a chestnut-rind,
> A land of hungry sorcerers.

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[30] Ibid., p. 150.

[31] Benét, Tiger Joy, pp. 88-95.

[32] Ibid., p. 50.

Describing his need of the soothing influence of Rosemary, he depicts the confusion of his mind in terms reminiscent of Mother Goose, in "A Nonsense Song":[33]

The cow's in the hammock, the crow's in the chair!
. . . . . .
The cat's in the coffee, the wind's in the east,
He screams like a peacock and whines like a priest
And the saw of his voice makes my blood turn to mice—
. . . . . .
Oh, when you are with me, my heart is white steel.
But the bat's in the belfry, the mold's in the meal,
And I think I hear skeletons climbing the stair!

In addition to the nursery rhyme and supernatural elements, folk expression is represented by the phrase, "bat's in the belfry." "Legend"[34] is a parable, depicting his yearning for the spiritually more satisfying things, and using the supernatural appearance of Saint Peter to personify the non-material powers. Biblical and classical legend are drawn on, in "For All Blasphemers,"[35] for self-analysis:

Adam was my grandfather,
A tall, spoiled child,
. . . . . .
Noah was my uncle
And he got dead drunk.
. . . . . .
Lilith, she's my sweetheart
. . . . . .
And all of her is snake.
Sweet as secret thievery,
I kiss her all I can. . .
. . . . . .

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33 Ibid., p. 54.

34 Ibid., p. 60.

35 Ibid., p. 84.

Bacchus was my brother,
Nimrod is my friend. . . .

The superstitions which attend dreams supply overtones for "Lost."[36]

With a start I arose where the moon waved pale on my bed--
For the night rang out to a clamor like desolate gulls,
To the pallid dispute of the chittering souls of the dead
Wizenedly seething afar in a river of skulls.
. . . . . .
I shuddered and crept to the warmth and the idle dream,
But through all the long stupor of night they quavered at me. . . .

Characterization of others. When Stephen Vincent Benét used folk materials to help characterize persons other than himself in his poetry, he leaned heavily upon the folk superstitions. Particularly was he prone to use the belief in ghosts, visible souls and fairies.

A number of poems are written for his wife, Rosemary Carr Benét, or for an unidentified "she" or "you," presumably his wife. "A Sad Song"[37] uses figures of speech typical of the fairy story.

Rosemary, Rosemary,
There's a Pig in your garden,
With silk bristles frizzy
And tushers of snow!
. . . . . .
Rosemary, Rosemary,
There's a Bird in your kitchen!
His voice is gold water,
He says, 'Pretty Poll!'
. . . . . .
Rosemary, Rosemary,
A silver-winged Rabbit!

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[36] Ibid., p. 86.

[37] Ibid., p. 52.

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[36] Ibid., p. 38.

[37] Ibid., p. 39.

Fairy characteristics emerge in "Chemical Analysis":[38]

> She's slender hands and pretty lips,
> And seafoam and rosemary.
> Her ears are pointed at the tips,
> She stayed so long in fairy.

The fairy again provides the imagery in "Nomenclature"[39] in which Benét says:

> As a fairy walks with a mushroom to keep the rain from its things
> You carry your name forever, like a sceptre alive with wings.

Other names are less romantic he says, descending to the folk language of the hayfield or barnyard to declare that "Some people have names like pitchforks. . . ."

The "ghost" imagery which Benét tends to use with great frequency occurs in "Memory,"[40] a poem so metaphysically involved that a number of interpretations are possible. Seemingly referring to a dead lover, he says,

> There was a ghost in the flesh,
> A ghost that came and went.

In "Days Pass: Men Pass,"[41] he returns to fairyland for the metaphor to describe his love: "The elf and her delight." The grave, in this poem, he describes as being

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[38] Ibid., p. 47.

[39] Ibid., p. 48.

[40] Benét, Burning City, p. 53.

[41] Benét, Tiger Joy, p. 65.

In the cool place where jests are few
And there's no time to weep
For all the untamed hearts we knew
Creeping like moths to sleep.

The conception of the soul as a visible object, often as a small, white, fluttering moth-like object, is found in a number of places in Benét's writings. The same conception occurs, for example, in "Dulce Ridentem,"[42] where mention is made of "The moth-wing soul of Jane."

Ghosts again are the medium through which Benét endeavors to make us see individuals, when his subjects are the mentally disordered of "Ghosts of a Lunatic Asylum."[43] After building up an eerie atmosphere, Benét says,

There's the Thumbless Man,
Still weaving glass and silk into a dream,
Although the wall shows through him--and the Khan
Journeys Cathay beside a paper stream.

A Rabbit Woman chitters by the door--
--Chilly the grave-smell comes from the turned sod--
Come--life the curtain--and be cold before
The silence of the eight men who were God!

The legends of pirate exploits are the materials of which Benét reconstructs a child's dreams in "Portrait of a Boy."[44]

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[42] Ibid., p. 63.

[43] Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), I, 411.

[44] Ibid., I, 339.

Beside webbed purples from some galleon's hold
A black chest bore the skull and bones in white
Above a scrawled "Gunpowder!" By the flames,
Decked out in crimson, gemmed with syenite,
Hailing their fellows with outrageous names,
The pirates sat and diced. Their eyes were moons.
"Doubloons!" they said. The words crashed gold.
"Doubloons!"

In a quatrain, "Ego,"[45] whose meaning is doubtful but whose use of Mother Goose is obvious, the lines go:

Well begun is nearly done.
(Blow the taper--bolt the door!)
But Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
Can't begin it any more.

Attitude toward his world. In that group of poems which Benét uses to express his feeling about the world around him--its problems, hopes, fears and meaning--are some of the most interesting ideas in which folklore is used as a means of presentation. Despite some contradictions, a strong pattern of philosophy in general emerges.

As in many another person, in Benét the sense of pessimism and futility strive against a passionate seeking for the ideal. Two examples of the negative factors in his philosophy are found in "For City Lovers"[46] and "Two Lovers."[47] In the first of these poems, the feeling of the utter finality of the past is expressed when it is said that the remains of lovers are deep down where "no

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[45] Benét, Tiger Joy, p. 119.

[46] Benét, Burning City, p. 60.

[47] Benét, Tiger Joy, p. 113.

earth-chewing shovel shall ever mouth them up from where they lie." The spirit they represented has vanished, it is said, because "There are no ghosts to raise." The uselessness of expecting their reappearance is told in the recital of various charms for protection against disembodied spirits:

> But do not wear rosemary, touch cold iron,
> Or leave out food before you go to bed.
> For there's no fear of ghosts. That boy and girl
> Are dust the sparrows bathe in, under the sun:
> Under the virgin rock their bones lie sunken. . . .

In "Two Lovers" there is added a sense of the futility of earthly passions and longings:

> What were you once? A woman. And you came--?
> Loving you, hither. Strange, for now we lie
> At peace, I do not even know your name.
> Nor I.

The folk character of "Two Lovers" is seen in the supernatural act of the dead conversing with each other.

Benét's own strong desire for an upward movement toward the ideal is discovered in his implied admiration for the highest aspects of Lincoln's character, in "Do You Remember, Springfield?"[48] The poem is one of sorrow over the materialism of Springfield, Illinois (the State "shaped like an arrowhead") which can ignore a Vachel Lindsay. The city's aversion to the arts is expressed in terms reminiscent of the old superstition belief in alchemy:

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[48] Benét, Burning City, p. 22.

Gather the leaves with rakes.
The burning autumn, Springfield,
Gather them in with rakes
Lest one of them turn to gold.

Folk practices supply the form of expression for the final stanza of satire, as they did for Lindsay's "The Broncho That Would Not Be Broken":

Break the colts to the plow
And make them pull their hearts out.
Break the broncos of dancing
And sell them for bones and hide.

This stanza is a direct allusion to Lindsay's "The Broncho That Would Not be Broken." However, Benét does not believe that Springfield's materialism is typical of Americans as a whole. He thinks his countrymen cherish traditions of the best in their past. In "Tuesday, November 5th, 1940,"[49] a poem in appreciation of Franklin D. Roosevelt, he recognizes the American trait of preserving legends embodying national ideals:

(The slow, tenacious memory of the people,
Somehow, holding on to the Lincolns, no matter who
yelled against them. . . .)

The manner in which the phrases which express certain American ideals have passed into our folk heritage, into the common verbal medium of exchange, is expressed in "Nightmare at Noon,"[50] a poem warning of the threat to

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[49] Stephen Vincent Benét, Last Circle (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1946), p. 109.

[50] Stephen Vincent Benét, Nightmare at Noon (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1940), p. 6.

democracy in the international situation of 1940. Indeed, he suggests that the words used to express our aspiration have become so worn that they may not mean as much to us as they should:

> There are certain words,
> Our own and others', we're used to--words we've used,
> Heard, had to recite, forgotten,
> Rubbed shiny in the pocket, left home for keepsakes,
> Inherited, stuck away in the back drawer,
> In the locked trunk, at the back of the quiet mind.
>
> Liberty, equality, fraternity.
> To none will we sell, refuse or deny, right or justice.
> We hold these truths to be self-evident.
>
> I am merely saying--what if these words pass?
> What if they pass and are gone and are no more.
> Eviscerated, blotted out of the world?
> We're used to them, so used that we half forget,
> The way you forget the looks of your own house
> And yet you can walk around it, in the darkness.

Personal dignity and freedom are exalted in "Ode to the Austrian Socialists,"[51] which describes the ill-fated resistance of February, 1934, against Naziism. All the greatness and beauty which life has achieved in the Austrian capital is summed up in the phrase, "a great ghost." "For Those Who Are as Right as Any"[52] may be subject to various interpretations, since its medium is a rather vague symbolism. However, there is reason to think the poem may represent the struggle between an aggressive Russian type of Communism, with its creed that the end justifies the means, and the spirit of individualism.

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[51] Benét, Burning City, p. 17.

[52] Ibid., p. 45.

The manner verges on the folk, with a supernatural representation of a spirit who is swordless and lordless (the free man?), refusing to be caught in the nets of a callous ideology. The exponent of pragmatism in its most ruthless form says:

> "And, when we have slain them all, we will build for men
> The city called Marvelous, the glittering town,
> And none shall be exalted or cast down
> But all at ease, all hatreds reconciled,"

only to be met with the answer,

> "I am air and I live. I live again and again.
> I am wind and fire. But I am not reconciled."

Benét sees war as the modern world's greatest problem, as does many another thinking writer of the present era. "Litany for Dictatorships,"[53] a poem commemorating the oppressed and persecuted of Europe, ends with an allusion to mythology which recognizes the wave of war sweeping toward all nations of the earth in the 1930's:

> Now the night rolls back on the West and the night is solid.
> Our fathers and ourselves sowed dragon's teeth.
> Our children know and suffer the armed men.

Ghosts are used to personify the approaching war in "1936."[54] In this poem, an army of skeletons marches before the poet's eyes.

> I knew them, then.

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[53] Ibid., p. 12.

[54] Benét, Selected Works, I, 454.

"It is eighteen years," I cried. "You must come no more."
"We know your names. We know that you are the dead.
Must you march forever from France and the last, blind war?"
"Fool! From the next!" they said.

The poet reaches the depths of pessimism in regard to war in "Nightmare, With Angels."[55] He is visited, in a nightmare, by two angels. One points out the ways to peace which could have been achieved--had a military dictatorship, a collectivist state or an autocratic church been able to gain and retain control of the world. The other angel, "appropriately dressed in cellophane, synthetic rubber and stainless steel," quietly declares:

"You will not be saved by General Motors or the
pre-fabricated house.
You will not be saved by dialectic materialism
or the Lambeth Conference.
You will not be saved by Vitamin D or the expanding
universe.
In fact, you will not be saved."
Then he showed his hand:
In his hand was a woven, wire basket, full of seeds, small
metallic and shining like the seeds of portulaca;
Where he sowed them, the green vine withered, and the
smoke and the armies sprang up.

Benét, in "Carol: New Style,"[56] recognizes the resistance of the human race to the application of Christian principles. Still, in recognizing the principles themselves, and the way they would "arouse" humanity, he can see, dimly, the possibility for an improvement of man's present dilemma. The poem itself is in a familiar folk pattern, with

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[55] Benét, Burning City, p. 73.

[56] Benét, Tiger Joy, p. 98.

dialogue, repetition of key phrases, a refrain line, and the laughter of the two dead thieves. "We're surer of God when we know he's dead," the three "Christians" say. Still, the suggestion of putting Christian doctrine into practice is present in the willingness of one of the three to take down Jesus Christ from the cross. The poem leaves one with the feeling that Benét puts himself in the place of that one, and that he wistfully looks to the ultimate possibility of Christ's becoming a factor great enough in human affairs to alleviate some of our urgent problems.

The Future

With Benét we can move our viewpoint into the future and look back as on folklore at the present or at what is now still the future. One critic declares that "some of the fables and nightmares. . . became part of our folklore as soon as the ink struck root into the paper."[57] Benét has very strongly the feeling, as he expresses it in "U. S. A.,"[58] that the time will come when "we're history, ourselves." The traditions and legends of that time will not necessarily be in line with our present outlook on things, he thinks:

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[57] Christopher Morley, with others, "As We Remember Him," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXVI (March 27, 1943), 8.

[58] Benét, A Book of Americans, p. 114.

Time's a curious capsizer
Of a lot of reputations that seemed certain to endure,
While he'll sometimes make his heroes
Out of people, once thought zeroes,
For the most well-grounded reasons, by the solemnly
cocksure.

It is Benét's hope that through the lore of the future our descendants may "remember, remember all," as he puts it in "If This Should Change."[59] "Remember, do not forget," he says in listing the characteristic things of America, and concludes:

Remember, maintain, remember, never forget.

Not in the great inscriptions, but in the blood.
Not in the able words, but under the hat.
These things were freedon. That is why they were good.
Remember that.

In preferring what is "in the blood" to the great inscriptions and the able words, Benét seems to urge the preservation of the simple things which often are transmitted through folk rather than through formal culture.

With these basic conceptions of the inevitability of posterity looking on us in a different light from that of our own self-estimate, and the desirability of holding to certain values in the past and present, he projects himself into the future in at least five poems.

He assumes the eventual destruction of New York City in "Notes to be Left in a Cornerstone."[60] The "notes" are

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[59] Stephen Vincent Benét, Last Circle (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1946), p. 103.

[60] Benét, Burning City, p. 3.

for those

> . . . who are to come, with Time,
> And gaze upon our ruins with strange eyes.

The point of view is that of one of the last generation to see the city as it was. The method of presentation is a dramatic monologue, with interspersed questions from some person of the far distant future. Benét creates a legend of the city from the looks of its buildings, the appearance and actions of its people, the city sounds, and the feel of the city air at different seasons. At the heart of his characterization is this passage:

> They were a race
> Most nervous, energetic, swift and wasteful,
> And maddened by the dry and beautiful light
> Although not knowing their madness.
> So they built
> Not as men before but as demons under a whip
> And the light was a whip and a sword and a spurning heel
> And the light wore out their hearts and they died praising it.
> . . . . . .
> They built the thing very high, far over their heads.
> Because of it, they gave up air, earth and stars.

Into his legend of the vanished city, he weaves an almost superstitious impression that the city was "a live beast," that

> . . . glittered like sea-water in the sun
> His heart beating, his lungs full of air and pride,
> And the strong shadow cutting the golden towers.

Benét feels that our present civilization, the "great beast," must in its present form fall because of inherent faults. His poems which develop the present in terms of future folklore suggest four different kinds of

and abruptly as the result of man's interminable wars, ending the human race. The narrator, a participant in the World's last war, tells how within a few months the birth rate slowed sharply and ended for all time. The hope is expressed that the animals, if it is their turn to build a civilization, can make a better go of it. Again there is allegory, in the allusion to decreased birthrates in the more advanced civilizations.

But the end which might most literally be true is presented with stark simplicity in "Song for Three Soldiers."[64] It is thoroughly folk in nature, not only because it is the legend-making type of poem, but because it is a ballad in form, and uses the supernatural appearance of three ghosts. The first is the ghost of the soldier of the past. The second, "with ray-gun and sun-bomb and everything new," announces that "I am the future and I am your brother."

But the third soldier is the spectre which even now the modern world fears. The ballad, in dialogue form, says:

> Oh, where are you coming from, soldier, gaunt soldier,
> With weapons beyond any reach of my mind,
> With weapons so deadly the world must grow older
> And die in its tracks, if it does not turn kind?
>
> Stand out of my way and be silent before me!
> For none shall come after me, foeman or friend,
> Since the seed of your seed called me out to employ me,
> And that was the longest, and that was the end.

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[64] Benét, Last Circle, p. 107.

Evaluation

Much that has been said of Benét's use of folk materials to provide characterization, background, symbolism and other values in the long poems is true also of the shorter poems. Omitting needless repetition, this summary may concentrate on a characteristic which emerges with especial clarity.

In very many of the short poems, as in much of Benét's other work to some extent, folk materials are the means for expressing the author's love for the values in America's past. Just as Chaucer looked, with a feeling almost akin to affection, on the rogues of his Canterbury Tales, so Benét handles his legendary and semi-legendary characters with a very evident warmth. His Johnny Appleseed, his mountain fiddler, his westward-bound immigrant represent to Benét certain virtues which were very real and very precious. His poems very often amount to an exhortation to preserve the heritage of folk America.

In looking with such affection at the America that was, and with such misgiving at the mechanized America that is and will be, it was natural that Benét should have been troubled by doubts and conflicts. Referring to such conflicts, he describes his mind as a map drawn by "a mad sea-captain. . . a land of hungry sorcerers." In his dreams, the "chittering souls of the dead". . . "all

the long stupor of night. . . quavered at me."

Benét's worst nightmare is the possible disappearance of America's heritage and tradition through headlong self-destruction. Throughout his poems on war, and his poems creating a "folklore of the future," he faces the possibility that some day the present America will be only a dim legend to the survivors--if indeed there are any survivors. Despite such pessimistic expressions, Benét in the poems as a whole voices a hope--a desperate hope--that something of our civilization may be preserved. For all his fatalistic assertion that "in fact, you will not be saved," he is still a voice crying out to War, "You must come no more." And, firm in his belief in the values of those things which are preserved by the tradition of the common folk, he has faith that those are what will save us--"Not in the great inscriptions, but in the blood." His lines ring with an almost vocal insistence: "Remember, maintain, remember, never forget."

CHAPTER V

SHORT STORIES

Publication of the Stories

Forty-four stories in book form. Despite the opinion of some critics that Stephen Vincent Benét was at his best in his poetry and particularly in John Brown's Body,[1] a great many readers know Benét and know him favorably through his short stories alone. The frequency with which certain of his stories appear in discriminating anthologies testifies to the effectiveness of his skill in the short fiction field. Also, despite the probability that much folklore of the supernatural is more at home in the flights of imaginative poetry than it is in the modern short story form, his fiction incorporates a surprisingly large quantity of folk materials. It is significant that the stories most often included in anthologies, such as "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and "Johnny Pye and the

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[1] For example, Henry W. Wells, in the College English article already cited, says on page 9: "A survey of his entire work leads us, I believe, to these views: that Benét will be remembered for his poetry rather than for his miscellaneous prose or other labors as man of letters, and that while some poetic power, much diminished by uncritical facility, may occasionally be found in his minor poems, the public has in no way erred in neglecting these and in giving a decisive verdict that John Brown's Body is both a true poem and an exceptionally good one. . . ."

Fool Killer" usually are the ones which are outstanding for their handling of folk themes.

In view of the volume of writing in other forms which Benét accomplished, the number of his short stories is considerable. Throughout his career his byline appeared with frequency above periodical short fiction. As early as 1920 he is listed in the O'Brien yearbooks as the author of short stories in magazines of national circulation. A satisfactory appraisal of his short stories may be made, however, on the basis of those stories which have appeared in book form. Certainly the tales selected for this more lasting form come closest to representing Benét's own mature judgment of what was worth writing. He himself admitted the unimportance of many of his earlier stories which have not been collected, by saying that when he was young he earned his bread and butter writing "he and she" stories; but he facetiously indicated the distance he had come by asking what a man in his thirties could know of boy-and-girl love.[2] The relative insignificance of much of the earlier short fiction also was implied in his brother's statement that Stephen Vincent Benét, after achieving some success, had enough time for considered work, and that his short stories then became more powerful.[3]

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[2] Robert Van Gelder, Writers and Writing (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 47.

[3] William Rose Benét, "My Brother Steve," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 15, 1941), 3.

In his first collection, Benét saw fit to include no story with a copyright date earlier than 1925.

That date marks the beginning of a nineteen-year period terminated by the author's death in 1943, during which were written the forty-four short stories available in book form. Most of these had the approval of the author himself since they were collected before his death. A few appear in a posthumous volume, and were chosen by his literary executors. The first collection was Thirteen O'Clock, in 1937, with thirteen stories. Tales Before Midnight, published in 1939, included twelve stories. In Volume II of Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét, which appeared in 1942, were four tales not previously published in book form, in addition to some from the previous two collections. The Last Circle, brought out in 1946, three years after Benét's death, was made up of fifteen short stories and a number of poems, all between boards for the first time.

It should be noted that "The Devil and Daniel Webster" was published alone as a thin volume in 1937, and "Johnny Pye and the Fool Killer" similarly in 1938. Twenty-Five Short Stories, in 1943, combined in one volume the contents of Thirteen O'Clock and Tales Before Midnight. These three titles, however, add no stories to the forty-four contained in the four books listed in the preceding paragraph.

Classification as to use of folk materials. Examination of the collected stories will be made not by volumes but by types, classified as to the manner in which the stories are related to folk materials. Thirty-one stories have such a relationship, ranging from stories which almost constitute folk tales in themselves, to others in which there are minor and casual allusions to folk culture. The remaining thirteen are without folk elements.

These thirteen, which may be eliminated at once from consideration, are, by volumes: "The Blood of the Martyrs," "A Story by Angela Poe," "Everybody Was Very Nice," and "Blossom and Fruit" in Thirteen O'Clock; "The Story About the Ant-Eater," "A Life at Angelo's," "Too Early Spring," "Schooner Fairchild's Class," and "Among Those Present" in Tales Before Midnight; "All Around the Town" and "No Visitors" in Selected Works; and "Famous" and "Good Picker" in The Last Circle.

Those stories which do have a folklore content may be divided into two main classes: Those in which a folk theme is the central and essential element, and those in which folk materials are an incidental factor. In the first group, there are three kinds of stories, if we use with slight alteration a classification which Benét himself set up for short stories in his Selected Works. These three categories are history and legend, tales of our times, and fantasies and prophecies.

History and legend. Of the three types of stories which depend primarily upon folk themes, the first is history and legend. In setting up his classification for the stories in Selected Works, Benét designated this group as "Tales of American History." The classification has been altered to include legend because certain other tales not in Selected Works are not historical, and because many of them in that collection are more legend than history. Benét was regarding the stories as they related to a figure or a period in American history--a viewpoint which does not change the fact that his treatment of those figures and periods was in the manner of folk legend.

One story in this group, "The King of the Cats,"[5] can be considered as being the reworking of an existing legend to a more modern form. His accomplishment in this case was, as Basil Davenport put it in his introduction to Selected Works, to "rewrite an old fairy tale for today."[6] As the source of the original myth, Benét in the story itself quotes a passage from one of Agnes Repplier's books.[7] Briefly, it concerns a traveler who told his

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[5] Stephen Vincent Benét, Thirteen O'Clock (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart ,1937), pp. 48-68.

[6] Basil Davenport, "Stephen Vincent Benét," Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1942), I, xii.

[7] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 61-62.

host of seeing, in a ruined abbey, a group of cats bury a small coffin with a crown upon it. The host's cat, hearing the account, cried "Then I am the King of the Cats!" and disappeared up the chimney.

Benét in his story sets up a conflict between his hero and a tailed man, an orchestra leader. Both desire the same girl. The protagonist, knowing the old folk legend and suspecting that the musician is really some form of monstrous cat, tells the story at a dinner party in the presence of his rival--who vanishes in a puff of smoke after repeating the traditional exclamation. As a matter of fact, legends of tailed men also are a part of folk tradition. An entire chapter entitled "Tailed Men" is included in one of the older standard works on folklore.[8]

"The Treasure of Vasco Gomez"[9] utilizes the stock figure from folklore, of the pirate returning red-handed to dig up the buried treasure on the desert island. The situation is the traditional one of the man's being marooned by a mutinous crew. The development which rescues the story from the trivial is the character change which comes over Gomez as he realizes how little his treasure will buy when all the wages of sin have been paid.

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[8] S. Baring-Gould, Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (New York: John B. Alden, 1884), pp. 86-95.

[9] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 93-111.

heat of passion, in a rained effect, a group of cats bear a pail north with a crown upon it. The murder act, bearing the account, called Tiger X as the king of the Cats, is discovered by the children.

Beneath this story lies a conflict between his mate and a veiled man, an opulent leader. Both desire the same girl. The protagonist, knowing the old folk legend and perceiving that the musician is really some form of monstrous cat, tells the story as a dinner party in the presence of his rival--who vanishes in a puff of smoke after repeating the traditional exclamation. As a matter of fact, legends of veiled men also are a part of folk tradition. An epitaphic chapter entitled "Veiled Man" is included in one of the older standard works on folklore.[8]

"The Treasure of Tanco Cowan"[9] utilizes the aged figure from folklore, of the pirate returning year-marked to dig up the buried treasure on the desert island. The attention is the traditional one of the man's being marooned by a mutinous crew. The development which recounts the story from the burial in the shrewster chamber which comes over Cobos as he realizes how little the treasure will buy when all the wives of his have been paid.

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[8] E. Barlina-Dodd, Original Works of the Middle Ages (New York: Ford & Allen, 1889), pp. 82-93.

[9] Dandy, Tailteann D'Fhool, pp. 95-111.

Starting with the knowledge that he will have to pay natives for a boat, he begins to count up with cringing soul the tremendous bribes which will be taken by officials high and low, civil and religious, before he can live in peace with what is left. He finally comes to the crushing realization that he cannot buy off God, and in disillusionment with his loot he throws it into the sea.[10] After his death, a ship stops at the island, and his body exhibits all the signs of starvation, although there is an abundance of food on the island. The story verges on the allegorical, and the implication is plain that the physical starvation is symbolic of a spiritual starvation which took place when Gomez lost his material aspirations and had absolutely nothing spiritual left to fall back upon.

"The Devil and Daniel Webster"[11] has so often been reprinted, and so widely read, that the story faces the prospect of being accepted as an actual folk tale of New England. It is "a new legend so perfect that it seems to have been always a part of our folklore--for the Devil and Daniel Webster ought forever to haunt New Hampshire as solidly as Rip Van Winkle and his gnomes haunt the Hudson."[12]

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[10] Cf. John Steinbeck's The Pearl, in which wealth is similarly thrown into the sea upon the realization that it can be productive of results other than beneficial.

[11] Stephen Vincent Benét, The Devil and Daniel Webster (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1937), pp. 1-61.

[12] Davenport, op. cit., p. xii.

Benét has "transformed pseudofolklore into a modern classic."[13] The entire lack of an original legend corresponding to the story, and the extent to which the tale is a product of Benét's imagination, is set forth by Robert Van Gelder:

> Mr. Benét keeps a work sheet on which he lists titles that seem to have the promise of a good story in them. One such title was "The Devil in New England." "At first I thought of having the Devil come to a small town in New England--a modern small town. Then I tried shifting it back into the past. It seemed a good idea but I didn't know what I'd have him do when he got there. Then I thought of Daniel Webster--how about if he met the devil? From then on it was easy, of course. Webster's strong point was oratory, so naturally he'd have to meet the Devil in an oratorical contest and win."[14]

Benét gives this story the trappings of a folk tale at the very beginning:

> It's a story they tell in the border country, where Massachusetts joins Vermont and New Hampshire. Yes, Dan'l Webster's dead--or, at least, they buried him. But every time there's a thunderstorm around Marshfield, they say you can hear his rolling voice in the hollows of the sky. And they say. . . .[15]

The outward form of the folk legend is here, in the declaration that it is an old popular story transmitted by word of mouth. In addition, the implication that Webster's "soul goes marching on" in a form which can materialize

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[13] Ernest E. Leisy, "Folklore in American Literature," College English VIII (December, 1946), 122-129.

[14] Van Gelder, op. cit., p. 47.

[15] Benét, The Devil and Daniel Webster, p. 13.

parallels many folk legends of men who are officially recorded as dead, but who according to popular belief are really alive or may return to life. A classic example of the popular tendency to believe in such survivals may be found in the myths which tell how John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, escaped and lived for many years. More recent examples are the belief on the part of some persons that Adolf Hitler survived the capture of Berlin, and is now preparing for a return to power; and the attempt of the part of an aged American to convince the public that he really is Jesse James. In the specific manner in which Benét's story declares Webster still manifests himself--the thunder which represents his voice--there is an echo of Washington Irving's use of the same phenomenon as the crash of the Hudson gnomes' bowling games.

The central idea in "The Devil and Daniel Webster" is the physical appearance of the Devil, and his purchase of the souls of those who are willing to serve him for gain. It is an old folk belief, which came into particular notice during the colonial period through witchcraft trials. The belief, however, is much older than Cotton Mather's time. It was the central idea in the story of Faust, and possibly has its origin in the worship of evil spirits by prehistoric tribes.

The central theme allies the story with the folklore

of mankind in general. In placing the setting in New England, and making the Devil's adversary Daniel Webster, Benét also connects the tale closely with New England traditions. Even more typical of New England than witchcraft and wizardry--which are not limited to that section alone--is the tradition of Daniel Webster.[16] The story emphasizes that section's store of legends regarding Webster's eloquence, and New England's democratic belief in the dignity and worth of the human individual and his soul.

Jabez Stone, in the story, sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for material prosperity for ten years. At the end of that time, Stone regrets his bargain, and engages Daniel Webster to defend him. In Stone's home, Webster meets his opponent in a law suit, before a jury of lost souls empaneled by the Devil. Webster, balked at every legal turn by his shrewd antagonist, resists the temptation to lose his temper and rant, for he suddenly realizes that the Devil is after bigger game than Stone--that he wants the soul of Webster himself. The famous New Englander, instead, uses all his powers of eloquence to recall to the doomed jury that they once were men, and that it is a wonderful thing to be a man with

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[16] B. A. Botkin, editor, A Treasury of New England Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), pp. 67, 116, 506, 526, 658, 766.

all the joys, hopes and fears of a man. The jury, carried away with the simple beauties of Webster's speech, ignores the Devil and acquits Stone.

The materials used in the story do much to give it the folk atmosphere. They include the dog howling when he senses the character of the diabolic visitor, the compact signed in blood, the belief in the visible soul, the ghosts who constitute the jury, and the tall tale statement that the Devil avoids New Hampshire to this day. A simple folk touch ends the story when Webster, fatigued from his exertions of the night-long trial, says he hopes the Stones have pie for breakfast.

An interesting variation of the story is a dramatic version which Benét wrote shortly after the publication of the original tale.[17] The one-act play condenses the action to one scene. The Devil arrives to claim the soul of Jabez Stone on the night of Stone's wedding party, and the contest between Webster and the Devil follows the departure of the guests. A number of differences reveal added touches of folklore in the play.

The dramatic version opens with a square dance. The fiddler is seated on a cider barrel, calling the dance

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[17] Stephen Vincent Benét, The Devil and Daniel Webster, Play in One Act (New York: Dramatists' Play Service, 1938), pp. 1-38.

figures: "Set to your partners, dosy-do!" "Left and right--grand chain!" "Set to your partners! Scratch for corn!" and "Cut your pigeon-wing, Jabez!"[18] The Devil appears and takes a hand at the fiddling, accompanying himself as he sings:

> Young William was a thriving boy.
> (Listen to my doleful tale.)
> Young Mary Clark was all his joy.
> (Listen to my doleful tale.)
>
> He swore he'd love her all his life.
> She swore she'd be his loving wife.
>
> But William found a gambler's den
> And drank with livery-stable men.
>
> He played the cards, he played the dice,
> He would not listen to advice.
>
> And when in church he tried to pray,
> The devil took the words away.
> . . . . . .
> The devil got him by the toe
> And so, alas, he had to go.
>
> "Young Mary Clark, young Mary Clark,
> I now must go into the dark."
> . . . . . .
> Young Mary lay upon her bed.
> "Alas my Will-i-am is dead."
>
> He came to her a bleeding ghost--[19]

In the story, the voice of the white moth which represents the soul of Miser Stevens, a neighbor, is heard by Jabez Stone only. In the play, the moth is visible, and its voice audible, to the entire wedding party. Jabez's

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[18] Ibid., p. 6.

[19] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

bride quotes the Biblical words of Ruth which have become a part of the folk consciousness: "For thy people shall be my people and thy God my God."[20] Webster indulges in the tall tale when he says, "Ten-year-old Medford. There's nothing like it. I saw an inch-worm take a drop of it once and he stood right up on his hind legs and bit a bee."[21] Another addition to the play is the invocation by the Devil to summon up his ghastly jury, with the stage blacked out and a green spotlight on his face:

> I summon the jury Mr. Webster demands.
> From churchyard mould and gallows grave,
> Brimstone pit and burning gulf,
> I summon them!
> . . . . . .
> I summon them, I summon them,
> From their tormented flame!
> Quick or dead, quick or dead,
> Broken heart and bitter head,
> . . . . . .
> Cankered earth and twisted tree,
> Outcasts of eternity,
> Twelve great sinners, tried and true,
> For the work they are to do!
> I summon them, I summon them!
> Appear, appear, appear![22]

The invocation has the ring of incantations familiar to popular myth.

Less significant, but still interesting since it expresses a phase of New England folklore, is the short

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[20] Ibid., p. 19.

[21] Ibid., p. 23.

[22] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

story, "Daniel Webster and the Sea Serpent."[23] This story makes Webster one of the discoverers of the monster, and relates that he hastened the signing by Lord Ashburton of the Webster-Ashburton treaty by threatening to commission the sea serpent as a war vessel of the United States Navy. That threat in itself is tinged with the nature of the tall tale, a fixture of folklore. The tall tale nature of the story is heightened by having the serpent develop an affection for Mr. Webster, by Webster's getting rid of the monster through a report that a handsome young male sea serpent had been sighted just off the coast of the Sandwich Islands, and by the final statement that when the American fleet went around the world in Teddy Roosevelt's time a lookout declared that he saw in the South Seas a pair of sea serpents and seven young ones, all flying the Stars and Stripes! The marine reptile does have a place in New England folklore.[24] Its most definitely recorded appearance was in 1817.[25] The Webster-Ashburton Treaty was somewhat later, in 1843.

Like the Daniel Webster stories, "A Tooth for Paul

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[23] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 184-204.

[24] Botkin, op. cit., pp. 215, 221, 285.

[25] Ibid., p. 304. On August 18, 1817, the Linnean Society of Boston formed a committee to collect evidence regarding a sea serpent allegedly seen in and near Glouster harbor from August 10 to 23 of that year, and in Long Island Sound on October 3 and 5. Testimony of twelve witnesses was recorded.

Revere"[26] has a touch of fantasy, but it is best classified with pseudo-legends of historical figures because the interest is more with the character of Revere than in the element of fantasy. A New England farmer, coming to the revolutionary silversmith for an artificial tooth, is given through mistake a tiny silver box which supernaturally contains the Revolution sealed within it. The farmer steps on the box at Lexington, crushing it and permitting the spirit of revolution to flare up over the land. Folk materials which help give the story the common touch include folk remedies, such as the tansy tea which Lige took for his toothache, and such proverbs as "In for a penny, in for a pound."[27] Like other of Benét's stories, this one is given the semblance of a genuine folk tale:

> . . . the way I heard it, it broke loose because of Lige Butterwick and his tooth.
>
> What's that? Why, the American Revolution, of course. . . well, your story about the land down South that they had to plow with alligators reminded me. . . My great-aunt was a Butterwick and I heard it from her . . . . What she liked was the queer corners of it and the tales that get handed down in families.[28]

"O'Halloran's Luck"[29] tells of an Irish immigrant who by his kindness to a leprechaun is granted enough luck

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[26] Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét, II, 17-31.

[27] Ibid., p. 20.

[28] Ibid., II, 17.

[29] Stephen Vincent Benét, Tales Before Midnight (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1939), pp. 51-73.

to rise from a railway construction worker to railway president. Written in the quaint folk speech of the uneducated Irishman, the story contains not only the Irish beliefs in pookas, banshees and leprechauns, but also the popular Irish legend that in America one might pick up gold from the ground, and that American servants ate off of gold plates. The story also records the saga of the transcontinental railroad building, in itself one of the greatest of American legends. When Tim O'Halloran hears a cry he imagines that it is a girl, and that when he rescues her from her unknown danger and restores her to her family, her father will turn out--as in all the old folk tales--to be a rich man anxious to bestow his daughter and his riches upon the rescuer. Instead, it is a leprechaun who has immigrated to America. The restoration of the little man to his former human state after the "doom" had been removed by O'Halloran's kindness is, of course, a familiar theme in folklore.

In "Johnny Pye and the Fool Killer,"[30] a humorous figure of actual folk myth, which previously had fascinated O. Henry,[31] is used in a serious manner. Johnny Pye first sees the Fool Killer as a menace to be escaped by avoiding

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[30] Ibid., pp. 21-50.

[31] Leisy, op. cit., p. 129.

all forms of foolishness. As a consequence, he tries many ways of living. Johnny finally comes to realize "what fools we mortals be," without exception, and that the Fool Killer really is death whom none can escape. The allegory provides a revelation of how many seemingly successful achievements are merely foolish and ostentatious. It also provides a philosophical conclusion that immortality on this earth, subject to the deterioration of the flesh, would be after all a rather futile thing. Part of the story consists of an odyssey in search of a desired goal, which is a theme frequent in folk tales. It is adorned with folk sayings, such as "the Fool Killer has come for So-and-So," and "a short horse is soon curried."[32] It presents the conventional folk conception of Death as an old man with a scythe in his hands.[33]

Tales of our time. This group is the smallest of those stories which depend entirely on some phase of folklore for their effect. Any story set in the present, which keeps its feet solidly enough on the earth to avoid classification as fantasy, is likely to be either a story in which folklore is incidental, or in which folklore does not appear. However, four stories may be mentioned here.

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[32] Benét, Tales Before Midnight, p. 37.

[33] Ibid., p. 41.

"The Die-Hard"[34] and "Glamour,"[35] though set in times recent enough to be called the present, depend upon the myth of the Old South--the idealized legend of magnolias and white-pillared mansions. In the former story, a crazed old Confederate officer dreams of restoring the South to all of its pre-Civil War glory, by organizing a new insurrection against the United States. After his death it is found that he has converted all of his meager income into bales of worthless Confederate money--a symbol for the artificiality of sickly romanticism. In "Glamour," a young, struggling Northern writer for a time falls under the spell of a Southern girl who has moved with her family to Brooklyn. He is as much a prisoner of the idealized South which she represents, as he is of her own personal charms. When she returns to the South, he realizes that they are farther apart in their backgrounds and ways of thinking than they are geographically. The tradition of the Old South had been used earlier by Benét, in his novel, Jean Huguenot.

"This Bright Dream,"[36] although a monologue of a woman living in the present time, depends fully upon a

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[34] Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét, pp. 74-90.

[35] Ibid., pp. 330-345.

[36] Stephen Vincent Benét, The Last Circle (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1946), pp. 207-223.

folk device, since it is a seemingly rambling account of her family chronicles and traditions. Told disconnectedly and at the same time artfully, it constitutes a folk form. Otherwise, it has few elements distinctively from the folk, except a reference to a song sung by the narrator's Uncle Jim: "I'm a snolleygoster and we'll jine the Union!"[37] The theme distilled from the family's ups and downs in this country is a statement of intense belief in the ideals of America:

> If we aren't going to be proud of some things and do our best to keep them, who's going to be proud of them for us? . . . It's a new, strange world we live in--a bitter world since last year. It may be we're in for hard and bitter days--the world's so small now. But we made ourselves a free nation. It wasn't handed to us on a silver platter--we made it and suffered for it. And, what we made, we can keep.[38]

"The Minister's Books"[39] is a story of a present-day minister whose aberration of mind is linked with old myths of demonology. Without going so far as to write a real fantasy, the materials of fantasy are placed in the protagonist's mind, and the reader is left to interpret the story as being either of the real supernatural type, or a study in psychology. As the latter, it is more interesting to the more literate type of reader. The story

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[37] Ibid., p. 217.

[38] Ibid., pp. 222-223.

[39] Ibid., pp. 48-66.

uses the folk belief in witchcraft and magical powers derived from the Devil. A young minister, through the lore he takes from old books on dark magic, attempts to save lives during an epidemic. The fact that the patients live leads him to think that he is bound to Satan, and that he is obligated to make a blood offering. On the point of killing the town drunk for this reason, he finds himself at the last minute unable to go through with the sacrifice. In remorse, he is about to hang himself when he is saved by one of his parishioners who suspects the root of the trouble. The signs and marks which some Pennsylvania farmers place upon their barns to prevent a hex are used in the development of the story. The minister finds his redemption in transfer to the foreign mission field, far from the scene of his dark experiences.

Fantasies and prophecies. A large group of the stories constitute fantasy fiction. As is common with much of this type of writing, many of the stories involve overtones of allegory or prophecy. "Into Egypt"[40] depicts, from the viewpoint of a young Nazi army lieutenant, the exile of thousands of Jews from Germany. The folk character is imparted in the last few pages, when at the end of the procession the lieutenant is confronted with the group, familiar to religious tradition, of the old man, the young

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[40] Benét, Tales Before Midnight, pp. 3-18.

woman on the donkey, and the child--with the plea that they are going into exile because the child is in danger. The final touch is a master stroke of fantasy:

> "Its hands had been hurt," said the lieutenant. "In the middle. Right through. I saw them. I wish I had not seen that. I wish I had not seen its hands."[41]

"The Curfew Tolls,"[42] using the letter form, builds a legend around the interesting conjecture of what might have happened had Napoleon lived and died at a less opportune moment of history. The letters of a retired British general give the letter-writer's impression of an ambitious, bitter, disillusioned Napoleon as he lived his last days before his "death" in 1789. The generalization to be drawn from the particular supposition is, of course, as interesting as is the description of the last days of a military genius born out of his time.

"William Riley and the Fates"[43] has as its protagonist a young reporter for a small-town weekly newspaper before World War I, who is given a glimpse of future events by attending a convention of the "United Sons and Daughters of Destiny." The "united sons and daughters" include an old man with a wheel of fortune and three women (later identified as the "Mesdames Norn" from Wisconsin) in an

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[41] Ibid., p. 18.

[42] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 115-137.

[43] Benét, The Last Circle, pp. 227-246.

oxcart, with "their long yellow braids of hair and their icy grey eyes. They seemed to be knitting all the time. . ."[44] The explanation given to William for the existence of such a variety of Fates is as follows:

> All sorts of people have been coming to this country for years and years--and of course, as they came, they brought their fates and destinies with them. . . they couldn't very well leave them behind. . . [the Fates] couldn't sit around in damp caves and wait for people to come to them. They had to take care of their people and grow up with the country. . . as old destinies die and pass away, new ones are born.[45]

The particular Fate to whom William is attracted--a young girl with two freckles on her nose--seems to clarify Benét's concept of fortune and free will, when she says, "There's fate and there's destiny--and there's man as well. And too many people make fate an excuse for failure. . . you were born a free man."[46] The youthful Fate ties up her purposes with those of a free, bold American people when she says to William:

> You'll hear this country is finished--well, we've heard that right from the first. You'll hear things will never be the same--well, they never have been quite the same, to my knowledge, since John Smith came to Jamestown. You'll hear people say they can't bear to have children with times so unsettled--well, if they feel that way, let them--I don't want their children. I'm young and I'm free and I'm growing, and I want the bold and the merry and the daring.

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[44] Ibid., p. 234.

[45] Ibid., pp. 238-239.

[46] Ibid., p. 242.

> I've a need for them and I'll use them and their bones will be dust in the graveyards, but their fate and mine will go on.[47]

"Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates"[48] is a bit of humorous fantasy, concerning a physician who found too little for him to do in Heaven, and so visited Hell and set up an office where he was needed more. Also humorous is "The Angel Was a Yankee,"[49] in which P. T. Barnum and Jim Bailey compete for the possession of an angel who has been caught by a New England farmer. This fantasy story is in reality the expansion of what could be, in fewer words, a typical tall tale. The angel happens to be a Yankee angel, and he flies away from the reach of both Barnum and Bailey because of his sense of duty in taking care of a "coast guard" assignment. The showmen make up for their loss of the big attraction by merging their circuses to create a bigger and better show. Not the least effective feature of the story is the angel's New England folk speech, with such expressions as "not a mite."

"The Danger of Shadows"[50] has a strong suggestion of allegory, in the inevitable analogy of a man's shadow and his subconscious, or "other self." Still, it fits best into the class of fantasy, in its tale of how a man

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[47] Ibid., p. 243.

[48] Benét, Tales Before Midnight, pp. 119-145.

[49] Benét, The Last Circle, pp. 67-80.

[50] Ibid., pp. 247-265.

let his shadow assume the proportions of a separate personality, which persuaded him to proceed to the very brink of running away to a Caribbean island, without his wife but with the firm's cash. The protagonist imagines the shadows stealing out at night for a conclave of their own. He wonders if shadows ever marry, and he thinks he sees his shadow leering at that of his secretary. He can feel an almost imperceptible backward tug from his shadow as he turns in at the gate of his home. So real does his delusion become, that he tries to kill himself in order to destroy the shadow who is torturing him.

"The Gold Dress"[51] is a fantasy involving the ghost of an old maid who came back to wear the pretty dresses which the woman had never dared wear in her repressed life. When finally exorcised with the assistance of a minister, the ghost disappeared but took with it a favorite gold dress. The traditional ghostly attributes of making itself known through a favorite perfume, and of requiring a lukewarm masculine admirer to come for frequent conversations, are manifested.

Although in several of his poems Benét has produced prophecies in the manner of "folklore of the future," he does the same thing in only two of his short stories. "By the Waters of Babylon"[52] purports to be the personal

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[51] Ibid., pp. 266-281.

[52] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 3-20.

narrative of a man in the savage times following "the great burning," and constitutes a little of the story of the long fight back to civilization. Tribesmen are depicted in frightened raids on ruined cities to secure metal, hoping they will not be overcome by the magic of those ruins. The taboos of the tribal priests are presented just as would be the folklore of present-day African or Indian tribes, while the vague and inaccurate legends of things as they were before the general destruction are presented as a fragment of almost wholly forgotten myth.

"The Last of the Legions,"[53] although it is not written in the peculiar "folklore of the future" form which characterizes "By the Waters of Babylon," has such prophetic overtones that it should be mentioned in any discussion of stories of prophecy. The centurion-narrator, made more perceptive by the sense of perspective he gains from the philosophical Greek soldier, Agathocles, foresees that the withdrawal of the Roman legions from Britain will result in the islands lapsing back into barbarism as tides of invaders pour in. As a prophecy it is, of course, historically correct, but that is not the interesting thing. More significant is the implication that the ruin of a civilization is not necessarily the ruin of all civilization. The centurion could not see, as can the twentieth

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[53] Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét, pp. 430-444.

century reader, that on the ruin, strengthened by the vitality of the Anglo-Saxon race, a new and greater civilization would arise.

Highly allegorical is "As It Was in the Beginning,"[54] in the form of a folk history of a primitive people. The narrator is an old man of the tribe. The feeling of genuine tradition is accentuated by the simple language, the primitive similes--a flow of words, in short, which is reminiscent of the language of the Old Testament. The narrator notes that the land from which his people came is beginning to be the subject of fabulous stories--stories that it was a land where the gods walked, or that it was a land full of giants and demons and dwarfs. These are, of course, typical figures of folk legend. The story rises to the level of an allegory, expressing the author's intense feeling for the ideals of America, when it is said, "though we did ill at times, yet our hearts were free. Let that be the thing to remember!"[55] The allegory looks forward to the future of America and of mankind--a future beset with danger, but also with promise:

> The Bronze People had those things, but their chiefs were bad and knavish, and the hearts of their people were not free. Now we go forward together, intermingled. And yet that, too, is but a beginning. . . . Will they, too, sweep down through the passes and into

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[54] Benét, The Last Circle, pp. 81-100.

[55] Ibid., p. 100.

> the City of Bricks and tear down the image of Marco and set up their own vile gods in the place of Atli, the one God? I wish I could know. . . there may be the blotting out of all. . . . Are there lands beyond? Are there still other peoples, still other gods? Someday, perhaps, we shall know, as our sailors push out more boldly. And for that there will be a price, as it was in the beginning. . . . We have spent a long time with gods and demons. But now at last we are men, with the choice of men. And the journey goes on.[56]

"The Land Where There is No Death"[57] also involves a journey and a search, as does "Johnny Pye and the Fool Killer" and "As It was in the Beginning." John spends his life looking for the deathless country, a theme which would be infantile were it not for the allegorical meaning. He returns disillusioned, as an old man, to his home, but through observation of the succession of ever-new generations he decides that the land where there is no death really exists, in the being of humanity itself, self-perpetuating generation after generation. There is reason to think that Benét saw himself in the figure of old John, for the protagonist was made a teller of stories, as well as a philosopher. The persistence of John's youthful belief in the land where there is no death is expressed in a folk proverb, "What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh."[58]

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[56] Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[57] Ibid., pp. 282-299.

[58] Ibid., p. 286.

Folklore as an Incidental Factor

Folklore is a more or less important factor in several other stories. "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing"[59] tells of a slave's desire for freedom and his escape to Canada by means of the "underground railway." It is notable for the subtle form which Benét has achieved. Initially, the suggestion of a legend is provided by the statement that "A long time ago, in times gone by, in slavery times, there was a man named Cue. I want to tell you about him."[60] This intimation of folk qualities is not the remarkable thing, however, There is a tone of the Negro folk song in the interruption of the thread of the narrative with such typical ejaculations as "Yes," "No, Lord," and "Yes, Lord."[61] There are echoes of "John Henry" in the statement, "He was strong; he was black as night; he was proud of his back and his arms."[62] The old woman who had come from Africa echoes a standard Negro folk song when she says, "Many thousands gone, and the thousands of many thousands that lived and died in slavery."[63] There is faithful reproduction of Negro folk speech in

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[59] Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét, II, 46-59.

[60] Ibid., II, 46.

[61] Ibid., p. 46.

[62] Ibid., p. 47.

[63] Ibid., p. 55.

such matters as use of the present for the past tense, and the omission of verbs at times, and references to such things as "white trash" and being "smart with his hands."[64] In addition to the elements of form, it may be noted that the material used includes the superstitious belief in the "conjure woman," and the folk trick of hypnotizing a chicken by drawing a straight chalk line from its beak along a board.[65]

The predominant folk theme running throughout the story, however, is the prophecy and advice of the old Negro woman, Aunt Rachel. When Cue goes to her with his trouble, she stirs the pot on the fire like the witches in Macbeth, and sees signs in the future: "A darkness in the sky and a cloud with a sword in it. . . because they hold our people and they hold our people."[66] She tells him of the underground railroad, and when he asks how he will find that road, she says:

> "You look at the rabbit in the brier and you see what he do. . . . You look at the owl in the woods and you see what he do. Then you come back and talk to me. Now I'm going to eat, because I'm hungry."[67]

After two attempts to escape from the plantation, Cue began to think, in his slow way, about the old woman's

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[64] Ibid., p. 47.

[65] Ibid., p. 49.

[66] Ibid., p. 50.

[67] Ibid., p. 51.

advice. He observed that the rabbit hid, and that the owl went softly, and at night. Applying these rules, he made good his escape to Canada. The advice is typical of Negro interest in animal lore, and of the close touch with nature on the part of primitive men.

"The Bishop's Beggar"[68] is a literary story in a framework intended to give it the flavor of folklore. "It seems that in the old days there was a bishop. . . ."[69] And, at the end of the story: "And all that, to be sure, was a long time ago. But they still tell the story in Remo when they show the bishop's tomb."[70] The narrative portrays a proud young bishop whose character changed until he had an extraordinary feeling of fraternity for the poor of his city, because of events after a beggar attached himself to the bishop's patronage.

"The Sobbin' Women"[71] concerns a family of Southern mountain brothers who could find no wives, and who finally resorted to marriage by capture, as in the old myth of the Romans and the Sabine women. The name of the Latin tribe from classical literature applies to the women, even though it is corrupted.

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[68] Benét, The Last Circle, pp. 5-30.

[69] Ibid., p. 5.

[70] Ibid., p. 30.

[71] Benét, Thirteen O'Clock, pp. 138-161.

The theme of "The Captives"[72] is the development of a new nation, virtually a new race, in colonial America, as seen through the eyes of a Scottish officer in the British army. The climax of the action depends entirely on the folklore element in the story--specifically, on the revival by means of a folk song, of childhood memories (including even her real name) in the mind of a white girl who had been captured years before by the Indians. Memory returns to Mary Carmichael as she listens to the old ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, which contains the similar name of Marie Carmichael. The fragments of the song as quoted in the story are:

> 'Now ye maun go wi' me,' she said
> 'True Thomas, ye maun go wi' me;
> And ye maun serve me seven years
> Thro' weal or woe as chance may be.'
> . . . . . .
> It was mirk, mirk night, there was nae starlight,
> They waded through red bluid to the knee
> . . . . . .
> The Queen was clad in scarlet
> Her merry maids all in green,
> . . . . . .
> Ride hooly, hooly gentlemen,
> Ride hooly now wi' me.
> . . . . . .
> Yestreen the Queen had four Maries,
> The night she'll hae but three;
> There was Marie Seaton and Marie Beaton
> And Marie Carmichael and me.[73]

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[72] Benét, The Last Circle, pp. 31-47.

[73] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

There are other touches of folklore which make the story more realistic and help it realize its purpose of portraying the distinctively American background. For example, the colonists say "You've kind of filled out in the brisket," and refer to "Christian tobacco."[74] These are examples of folk speech, which should be distinguished from mere dialect, or a distinctive manner of pronouncing words. The characteristics of the folk legend are reflected in the comment on Mary Carmichael's appearance: "There are wild legends of women turned into deer. I could believe them, looking at her face."[75] The story of her capture by the Indians, as she told it, was "like one of our own rude ballads of children stolen away to dwell in a green hill."[76] There was "a fey quality to her" which the Indians had recognized: ". . . they thought I helped with the corn. . . . They did not wish to give me a husband until they were sure the corn would like it."[77] This attitude, of course, involves Indian folk beliefs concerning the magic rites necessary to secure a good crop. The lore of Indian medicine is combined with the supernatural when we are told: "[Mary Carmichael] had come

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[74] Ibid., p. 35.

[75] Ibid., p. 37.

[76] Ibid., p. 38.

[77] Ibid., p. 37.

only connection with mythology. "A Gentleman of Fortune" which concerns a superannuated confidence man follows along one of the strange byways of tradition, "the great tradition of the Con." Primarily, however, it is a story of virtue triumphing in an individual's old age, when the weariness of years presses heavily upon the energy necessary for working confidence rackets. A touch of genuine folklore is introduced when an Irish policeman compares the appearance of the wizened little old confidence man to that of a leprechaun. "The Prodigal Children" is a study in the responsibility of the World War I generation for the occurrence of World War II. Harry Grandall defends that generation but admits the fallibility of the generation--or of all humanity--when he uses the phraseology of Uncle Remus to say, "Born and bred in the briar patch, and now we're back there again."

Evaluation

Of forty-four stories, twenty-two depend in a major way upon some aspect of folklore. Of the others, nine have interesting incidental allusions to folk culture, or resemblances to its forms.

When it comes to the reasons for Benét's use of folk materials in his short stories, much that has been said of such a use in poetry is again applicable. For

example, character and background are made more genuine by placing folk-speech in the mouths of the characters, or by writing the stories in the form of folk legend.

It is possible that Benét had a conscious realization that folk themes, being close to the people, would carry with them an inherent interest. This would imply a choice of folk materials in preference to other possibilities on the ground of basic human appeal. His stories then would be, in the words of his brother, William Rose Benét,

> . . . legend for his own folk,
> Of their toil and of their mirth,
> Tang of the tongue they spoke,
> The savour of their earth.[81]

It is true, of course, that the general public's dependence for culture upon folk materials is far less than it formerly was, with increasing dependence upon formal education. Nevertheless, folk patterns even though in some cases now dim, must appeal to certain fundamental human desires in order to have gained their former general acceptance, and Benét was skilled at blowing the smoldering embers back into life.

Benét furthermore found the medium of folk materials ideal for presenting his own strong feelings and beliefs. Foremost among these attitudes is an intense Americanism,

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[81] William Rose Benét, "S. V. B., 1898-1943," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXVI (March 27, 1943), 4.

a belief that the values distilled by three centuries of life on this continent are worth preserving. This creed is reflected in the Daniel Webster stories, "A Tooth for Paul Revere," "Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates," "The Angel Was a Yankee," "The Captives," "William Riley and the Fates," "Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing," and "This Bright Dream."

He also uses folk forms and materials to express his belief in mankind, his feeling that despite all man's ugliness and blundering, the divine spark in him will bring the human race through dark and troublesome days to a higher plane. He shows the essential humanity even in a Nazi, in "Into Egypt." The narrator of "By the Waters of Babylon" is fearful, yet hopeful of winning through to better things across the horizon. The protagonist in "The Minister's Books" comes near tragedy, but with human help shakes off the tyrannical hand of the dark past. The bishop in "The Bishop's Beggar," with every reason to gravitate to the sloth of indifference and worldliness, is aroused by suffering humanity to the best of which he is capable. In "The Last of the Legions" we see the real basis for pessimism over the continued existence of our civilization, and at the same time we inevitably see how circumscribed our foresight may be. In none of these would the effect be quite the same if folk forms or elements

were deleted.

Finally, there is a spiritual note which looks toward a higher significance in life and the universe than is found among the materialistic writers. Such a theme leads to the writing of "The Land Where There Is No Death," and "Johnny Pye and the Fool Killer." Through these stories in the form of folk legends, we are led to feel Benét's belief in values which transcend ordinary standards of success and failure.

It is perhaps indicative of Benét's attitude toward the use of folk materials, that whereas in his earlier short prose the stories leaning heavily upon folk elements and those which did not were about equally divided. The Last Circle has ten stories with strong use of the folk, and three which make incidental use of folk allusions. Only two are devoid of folk materials or forms.

CHAPTER VI

NOVELS

A Field of Early Effort

During six years of the early twenties, Stephen Vincent Benét wrote four novels. After an interval of eight years, he completed his fifth and last novel. During the final ten years of his life he produced no other work of this type. Benét apparently had concluded that his chief ability lay in other fields.

The novels are interesting, however, in a study of Benét's use of folk materials. Some conclusions may be drawn from them as to his attitude toward such materials in the early part of his writing career, his ability to handle those materials, and the development of that ability. All the novels will be examined, not alone for the folk materials to be found in them, but also with relation to Benét's later and better work.

The first novel was The Beginning of Wisdom, published in 1921. This had been preceded only by some of his relatively immature poetry. In the two succeeding years appeared Young People's Pride and Jean Huguenot. In 1926 Spanish Bayonet was published, and in 1934, James Shore's Daughter.

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During all phases of the early Communism, Blanchon Vinogra Bendt wrote four novels. After an interval of eight years, he completed his fifth and last novel. During the final two years of his life he produced no other work of this type. Surely circumstances had conspired that his major ability lay in other fields.

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The first novel was *The Beginning of Eternity*, published in 1923. This had been preceded only by some of his relatively unknown poetry. In the two succeeding years appeared *Anna Ivanova Zilnaya* and *I am Immortal*. In 1924 *Mankind Is Young* was published, and in 1928, *Lunes Kerrele Dunkirk*.

The Novels Analyzed

The Beginning of Wisdom. Benét's first novel is the story of Philip Sellaby, and how he progressed to a realization of what he wanted from life. Philip had three goals: a writing career, a satisfactory understanding of and adjustment to life, and marriage with his cousin, Sylvia. The first two are very well integrated, but the romance is brought in as a separate, final and distinct episode. Treated in this manner, the love story has the appearance of a postscript, thrown in as an afterthought and as a sop to popular reading habits.

Touches of folklore in a surprising quantity are evident in The Beginning of Wisdom, and, considering its early date, they are placed with a deftness which often is skillful. Classic mythology helps reveal the initial personality of the young Philip, reared in an above-middle-class family, and educated at a private school and at Yale. Folk materials of a more earthy nature mark his experiences in the copper-mining country; and the Army's own variety of folk speech marks his experiences during World War I. Over all hangs Benét's ever-present feeling for the supernatural in figures of speech.

In one of the bits of verse which are scattered throughout the book, there is reference to a "young ram" and to "the young sun-god" who "steps out of a cloud /

And covers his horns with gold."[1] Another reference with a classic cast is in "The Proud Huntsman (Being a poem Philip wrote about this time)," with the line, "There is our Phoenix yet to find,"[2] In this case the phoenix is a symbol for Life, with a capital L. In the same tradition is Philip's vision, in a dream, of the three Fates sending little colored balls rolling down through labyrinthian mazes--bumping against each other, veering off to themselves, sometimes dropping quietly out of sight through holes in the board.[3]

When Philip, at Yale, wrote poetry, the first poem to be published in a college literary magazine was "a long, bloody ballad he had stewed out of the bones of William Morris."[4] Memories of his freshman classmates "trundle like Jack-o-lantern ghosts out of the wraith of that dim first year."[5] When Philip writes "the best thing I've done in my life" it concerns Isis and the Sphinx.[6] His friend Johnny Chipman is described as "a lonely Puck-Ariel."[7] At a Christmas party, the students

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[1] Stephen Vincent Benét, The Beginning of Wisdom (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1921), p. 39.

[2] Ibid., p. 41.

[3] Ibid., pp. 44-46.

[4] Ibid., p. 60.

[5] Ibid., p. 63.

[6] Ibid., p. 67.

[7] Ibid., p. 76.

sing:

> Good King Wenceslas looked out
> On the feast of Stephen--

as well as the rowdier "Frankie and Johnnie."[8] The use of the homely folk ballad is the first instance of folklore in the book that is not classical or supernatural in a manner suitable to his background. It suggests the beginning of an influence which eventually will bring him closer to the masses, and is not out of place in a college student body which can be rather cosmopolitan in its associations.

An impressionistic passage recording the moods of young Philip raises the query: "But who cares now if we bump into a rock or a Mermaid?"[9] There is an echo of primitive superstition in the description of California hills whose "backs are rounded and huge as the tortoise that holds up the weight of the world."[10]

As Philip begins to broaden mentally, he begins to use homelier ways of thinking. Without describing the nature of the persons with whom the boy comes into contact, Benét seems to suggest subtly, through the folk-nature of the portrait he is drawing, the companions who are poor or were farm-boys, the bar-maids and restaurant employees of a college town, the whole democratic array of common people met in travel. As he abandons his

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[8] Ibid., p. 82.
[9] Ibid., p. 91.
[10] Ibid., p. 93.

sophomoric outlook on literature, he looks back on outgrown attitudes as the "cast skins" of "the molting snake."[11] He sees the strenuous nature of life, and sums it up in the phrase, "Scratch dirt or pass out."[12] He attends a country dance and enjoys the fiddle music, but his way of describing the dance is still in the bookish tradition. The music makes the floor like the deck of a galleon, and makes the girls "glimmery sea-girls with coral and clear pearl-shells for their side-combs."[13] The mermaid as a figure of speech seems to have caught Benét's fancy, as has the cast skin of the snake. He uses both expressions later in John Brown's Body. Jack Ellyat wandered in the Connecticut woods where the dried leaves were like dried snake skins; and the introduction of iron-clad vessels figuratively sank all the wooden navies of history, down to Davy Jones' locker where the mermaids stared at them.

In the latter years of college, classical and popular myth both are used to portray Philip's progress. Book III of the novel is entitled "Frankie and Johnny Were Lovers."[14] But in a poem heading that section, entitled

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[11] Ibid., p. 101.

[12] Ibid., p. 106.

[13] Ibid., p. 108.

[14] Ibid., p. 111.

"Sung in a Summer Garden," the life in the sown seed is referred to as "wrinkled imps in the seed"; and the poem includes a line, "Satyr, sound on your pipe!"[15]

Philip has a youthful student marriage, to a girl named Milly who within a few months dies of pneumonia. Milly "has all the pride and witchcraft of first youth."[16] Their love affair seemed "a porcelain fairy-tale,"[17] and Philip's absorption in Milly "a case of demoniac possession."[18] Milly, sleeping, was hard to wake, and according to her friend, Jenny, "must be kin to the Seven Sleepers."[19]

In the mining town where Philip went to work, the elite live in a section which he calls "Valhalla, the abode of the gods"--another phrase which appears to have captured Benét's imagination, for an extended dream of Jack Ellyat in John Brown's Body transforms the rainy forest in which he is lost to the supernatural abode of mythical Norse gods.[20] A poem interpolated in this section introduced a mental vision of two ghosts in Philip's mind. One is the "lost spectre" of youth, and the other is death:

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[15] Ibid., pp. 113-114.

[16] Ibid., p. 119.

[17] Ibid., p. 133.

[18] Ibid., p. 135.

[19] Ibid., p. 139.

[20] Ibid., p. 156.

"I am the thing you were," he said,
"When you had twenty years. . . ."
. . . . . .
The next was hot and galloping,
A skull within a cloak
. . . . . .
"I am the shadow of your soul,
The nightmare. . . ."[21]

That part of personal tradition and social tradition which associates individual recollections or abstract ideas with scents of flowers has been used effectively in literature.[22] So, Benét was following a well-blazed trail when he used this folk myth to motivate some of the actions of Philip Sellaby. Philip's first night as Milly's lover is associated with the scent of violets--"Fragrance trembles from wet wood-violets."[23] After the death of Milly, her memory was "a deathly perfume that hunted him and clung to him so that the only desire he had was to fall and annihilate himself in its piercing fragrance of wet violets."[24] Finally, when he is on the point of suicide, the memory of the scent holds him back:

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[21] Ibid., pp. 167-168.

[22] E.g., O. Henry's story, "The Furnished Room," where a scent is identified with an individual; William Cullen Bryant's poem, "The Yellow Violet," in which that flower and its "faint perfume" symbolize modesty and humility; and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," which associates the lilac blossom and its fragrance with the death of Lincoln.

[23] Benét, The Beginning of Wisdom, p. 138.

[24] Ibid., p. 147.

> The scent that was Milly, the scent of the flowers he had wanted to put on her grave, grew bitingly strong. It passed over him like a tide made up of a multitude of blossoms. It ended, and was followed by an instant of terrible peace.[25]

Once more, the same scent is to affect the course of his life. In Hollywood, he has gone to the home of a predatory female who has been stalking him for weeks. He is feeling his way through the darkness of her house, about to enter her room.

> The odors of the shut, womanish rooms, languid and fleshy, climbed up to his mouth like a wave. And then, ripping them aside as a hand tears down a curtain, came a clean unearthly scent, engulfing his soul, the scent of wet white violets. . . he turned and ran back through the dim rooms with the desperate haste of a boy hunted down by witches.[26]

Many of the allusions to folklore while Philip is in the mining camp have the common, rather than the classical touch. The crowd of workers was "the Irish stew of humanity."[27] Philip, when assured by a doctor that he was not tubercular, "executed three steps of a double-shuffle, and started chanting the chorus of 'Christopher Colombo' before he remembered where he was."[28] When the radical workers--and many who are not radical--are run out of town, and finally are escorted to a temporary

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[25] Ibid., pp. 148-149.

[26] Ibid., p. 254.

[27] Ibid., p. 176.

[28] Ibid., p. 181.

camp by troops, the column of men is "yelling 'John Brown's Body' at the top of its lungs."[29] The classical influence still is so strong, however, that during this period when Philip hits upon a subject for a long poem, the vision that he has is that of "Io of the old Greek fable walking through fields of the most marvellous and impossible flowers."[30] After leaving the mining camp, Philip is robbed of his money while he sleeps. The thief is a red-haired man, and Philip cursed "all Judas-topped thieves."[31] Folk tradition attributed red hair to the betrayer of Christ.[32]

The episode of Pancha Verschole, the movie "vampire" already mentioned in connection with the use of scent as a motivating factor, also makes use of the folk belief in the ability of witches to change themselves to animals. Pancha seems to him to resemble a white cat.

> She laughed pussily. . . . He had a picture of a great white shameless cat, purring and licking itself in the middle of a silken bed. . . . Another picture of the white cat in the room to which he was going came to him, only this time the thing was heavy with sleeping and its paws lay over his face. . . that hot mewing voice again through curtains and dead fragrance.[33]

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[29] Ibid., p. 203.

[30] Ibid., p. 199.

[31] Ibid., p. 218.

[32] New English Dictionary: "Judas-colour, Judas-coloured a. (of the hair or beard) red (from the medieval belief that Judas Iscariot had red hair and beard)."

[33] Benét, The Beginning of Wisdom, pp. 253-254.

The same idea was to be used later by Benét, in much more dramatic fashion, in his short story, "The King of the Cats." Pancha is pictured not only through ancient folk belief, but in well-established folk terms. In Biblical phrases which have become a part of tradition, "it amused him to play Joseph from the country when she was so obviously eager for the role of Potiphar's wife."[34]

The traditional idea of God, held by the unlettered, as being an old man with a long white beard who sits enthroned in the sky, is introduced in the gradual evolution of Philip's ideas concerning deity. In Fresno, Philip encounters a fanatic who claims to be God and who discusses his omnipotence until a keeper comes to take him back to the asylum. However, "Philip suddenly saw that his eyes were bright and empty as pieces of washed glass. . . . Then he felt a little sickish in his interior, for he remembered the vacant gray clarity in the old man's eyes."[35]

Later, Philip in a dream of Heaven thinks he is in the presence of the real God.[36] He demands of God some reasons for things as they are.

> Philip lifted his eyes very slowly and a black horror of soul came upon him.

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[34] Ibid., p. 245.

[35] Ibid., pp. 224-225.

[36] The dream is in the same vein as the incident in James Branch Cabell's novel, in which Jurgen meets the God of his grandmother.

> "I think I met you in Fresno," he said uncertainly, for he had looked into the eyes of God and they were as bright and empty as pieces of washed glass.[37]

Thereupon he decides that Heaven is a sham, that there is no God. Embittered, he plunges back to earth. In his dream, he comes to the realization that he has a soul, and much to make of it. The face of God appears before him again, and Philip is no longer bitter.

> "I don't know that I want any reasons," said Philip. "We are only thoughts, my Lord, and you are as I, and no thought can destroy another thought through all the eternities."
> "You are beginning to see, a little," said the tones of an earthquake.
> "As for reasons," said Philip, "I will do what comes to my hand and abide the issue. For I have scorn again and defiance again and my own soul again. . . . The thing is to live," he said in the end, and that is hard enough at any time. . . ."[38]

Philip's progress to this point, in his conception of the deity, is summed up in the statement that

> Heaven and all its saints had fallen to pieces when he first discovered cruelty that was both causeless and unpunished--it had been replaced in a measure by living, in a measure by the crude atheism. . . . a working doctrine of irony that healed as it seared the mind. . . .[39]

Sitting in a vacant church on a rainy day, reading Piers Plowman, Philip comes to the realization that his "working doctrine of irony" is not enough.

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[37] Benét, The Beginning of Wisdom, p. 272.

[38] Ibid., pp. 277-278.

[39] Ibid., p. 350.

> Then an emotion that was like nothing he had ever felt, like eyeless fear, like white reverence, like the confident homage of a courageous son, like the headlong defiance of swimming against strong sea, came into him. . . .
>
> "There is something," he said steadily, "something better than my own sod. Something living as lightning and merciful as rain. Something neither to be adored as an image nor hated as a foe, but a thing to be followed like a banner through the bones and wrecked armor of all the faiths in the world. Something comradely and despised by prophets, something lordly that wears all beauty like a careless coat, something greater than myself for which I am ready to die forever, if it be necessary, but something that will not let the least senseless cell of me wholly die. I accept it, God or love or art, I accept it. And I am ready to search for it and serve it and glorify it through life and the fear of life forever and ever. . . ."[40]

Having finally come to accept the existence of a superior power of admirable and benevolent qualities, he and Sylvia, his fiancee, leave the church. They meet a Portuguese fisherman who calls them "nice children" and wishes them good luck. Sylvia resents the "condescension" of a "village wop," but Philip is pleased.

> ". . . on the whole, you know, Syl, I'm just as glad he regards us as good material."
>
> For he had seen into the eyes of the stranger as he went whistling away, and the face was young as the sunrise, but the eyes were curiously gray and vivid like pieces of clean glass.[41]

In this series of experiences which symbolize Philip's changing attitude, starting with the popular conception of childhood tradition, the eyes, bright and empty as pieces

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[40] Ibid., pp. 351-352.

[41] Ibid., p. 355.

and "the merry grin of a satyr."[44] "I've sold my soul to a jocular devil," Philip says to himself, "but at least he's giving me the world and the flesh along with it."[45] Philip's director, Hay, attributes his luck to a talisman, a "small nude doll" which probably is a representation of Cupid. He cherishes the token with the proud superstition with which a serpent in a Russian fairy tale guards the duck's egg that contains its death.[46] Finally undergoing an operation to remove the last obstacle to military service, Philip dreams while under the anesthetic that he "was lying on his back in the middle of a limitless white billowy plain and the three gray Fates were sitting on their heels beside him." He rolls dice with the three Fates for his body, soul and mind--and he wins.[47]

In the Army, "there was the battery funny-man. . . knew all the underground folk ballads of the United States from 'Down on the Lehigh Valley' to "My Girl's a Lulu.'"[48] A hysterical girl on a station platform, with wild hair streaming in the wind, kissed all the soldiers she could reach, and "Philip thought of the Valkyrie. . . ."[49]

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[44] Ibid., p. 234.
[45] Ibid., p. 235.
[46] Ibid., p. 237.
[47] Ibid., p. 259.
[48] Ibid., p. 286.
[49] Ibid., p. 305.

The folk speech and traditional customs of the soldier of the first World War are used to give color to Philip's experiences in the Army. These include "KP," "policing the barracks,"[50] "the battery dog-robber,"[51] and "slacker."[52] "Guns used to be baptized at the foundry like children."[53] ". . . publicly all cursed out the entire system from the first sergeant's liver to a lack of milk in the java with heartiness of soul and epithet that has been the peculiar possession of privates since the Tenth Legion's disruputable jests on Ceasar's bald head."[54] The soldier who "borrows" his cigarettes from his fellows in known as a "fag-hound."[55] The battery sings songs which have become part of the soldier's folk tradition. They sing:

> Oh, it's hi-hi-hee in the Field Artillery,
> Shout out your numbers loud and strong!—
> One! Two!

Another of their songs:

> The artillery, the artillery, with the dirt behind their ears,
> The artillery, the artillery, that laps up all the beers,
> The cavalry, the infantry,
> And the God damn engineers!
> They couldn't lick the artillery in a hundred thousand years![56]

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[50] Ibid., p. 282.

[51] Ibid., p. 287.

[52] Ibid., p. 288.

[53] Ibid., p. 293.

[54] Ibid., p. 294.

[55] Ibid., p. 295.

[56] Ibid., p. 302.

The battery then launches into a verse or two of "Hinky Dinky Parley-Voo."[57]

There is the traditional crap game on the troop train, where the soldiers were fitted out with their overseas outfits, "'go to hell hats' and all."[58] As the Armistice ends their chance of going overseas, an old Regular Army sergeant mutters in disgust the popular saying, "Papa, what did you do in the Great War?"[59]

After discharge, Philip has an aversion to returning to home and an unsympathetic father. In folk terms derived from a Biblical source, he feels that if he returns "the role would be less that of the prodigal son than the fatted calf, a burnt offering to Phil's bad temper."[60]

He finds a job on a chicken ranch, where he "played Juno, goddess of accouchements, he thought, to whole armies of oval, stupid-looking eggs."[61] Classical mythology again obsesses him as he works on a poem:

> He saw all the million eyes of Argus, the watchful beast, shudder like jewels before a flame as Apollo stood over him, the silver kingly bowstring tugged back to his ear, the feather of the ravenous shaft like a gay piece of silk against his curls. . . .

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[57] Ibid., p. 303.

[58] Ibid., p. 305.

[59] Ibid., p. 307.

[60] Ibid., p. 309.

[61] Ibid., p. 312.

> Zeus mourned, earth was terrified at his trouble, in the lands of Hyperboreans strange gods with the eyes of sea crabs hatched before Chronos out of the cold, gray egg of Time, crept back to ruinous altars and prophesied to their abominable worshipers that Zeus would die. . . .[62]

The folklore of fairies, ghosts and Norse myths is used in describing the relations between Philip and a cousin, Sylvia, whom he meets and loves. "Ever since their absurd reunion on the road he has known what is the matter with him with the certainty of the fey."[63] ". . . this time they kiss elvishly and long, like passionate ghosts."[64] To Philip, Sylvia is "the luminous diverse changeling thing herself."[65] When they were in a room by themselves, it seemed as though a tree had grown up between them, that they were together in the haven of its boughs. "The branches of Yggdrasil, the tree whose roots are the veins of the world, moved over them gently."[66] Seeing Sylvia unexpectedly in the dimness of a church, "for a moment. . . he thought it was one of the fetches that went between old lovers, heralding death."[67] "[Sylvia's] lips were as cold as a mermaid's as he kissed

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[62] Ibid., pp. 318-319.

[63] Ibid., p. 337.

[64] Ibid., p. 340.

[65] Ibid., p. 343.

[66] Ibid., p. 344.

[67] Ibid., p. 353.

them."[68]

Young People's Pride. Benét's second novel deals with the difficulties of Oliver Crosse, a young writer working for a pittance in a New York advertising agency immediately after the first World War. He vainly seeks to sell serial rights on a novel he has written, so that he can marry his St. Louis fiancee, Nancy, and go to Paris and write what he pleases. The story also involves his friend, Ted Billett, whose New England puritanical conscience will not let him marry the rich girl of his dreams, because of escapades in which he had been involved while a soldier in France. Eventually, Oliver swallows his pride and marries Nancy who, successful in her field, is able to get a good job in Paris, and Ted smothers his conscience and marries the girl he loves.

Folk materials are used to a much smaller extent in Young People's Pride than in The Beginning of Wisdom. Oliver expresses fear that his family's jerry-built house might collapse and let Aunt Elvie fall to the basement "like Lucifer cast from Heaven."[69] In Oliver's imagination,

> . . . all he could see would be a wraith of Nancy
> . .. till he felt like a painter who has somehow

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[68] Ibid., p. 354.

[69] Stephen Vincent Benét, Young People's Pride (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1922), p. 27.

> let the devil into his paintbox so that each stroke he makes goes a little fatally out of true from the vision in his mind till the canvas is only a crazy-quilt of reds and yellows.[70]

Oliver feels that he needs the actual presence of Nancy instead of letters only, as ". . . the best remembrance makes only brilliant ghosts."[71] But he attempts to be philosophical, saying, in the words of the popular adage from the Bible, "Well, sufficient to the day was the evil thereof."[72] Ted Billett, thrilled by the presence of Mrs. Severance, an adventuress some years older than himself, is reminded of "The Morte d'Arthur--the two with a sword between."[73] One of the younger children in the Crosse family, speaking to his grandfather, asks if he is "as old as Methuselah."[74] Ted imagines his loved one as a princess of Egypt, and himself as one of the Israelite slaves "making bricks without straw"--an expression which has come to have proverbial significance and currency.[75] In a bantering mood, Oliver says, "Tell us a story. . . the Three Bears or Jack the Giant-Killer," and Elinor, Ted's friend, tells the Dormouse Tale from

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[70] Ibid., p. 33.

[71] Ibid., p. 37.

[72] Ibid., p. 41.

[73] Ibid., p. 48.

[74] Ibid., p. 51.

[75] Ibid., p. 58.

Alice in Wonderland.[76] In a conversation with Mrs. Severance, Ted finds "a conversational jumping-off place," using the folk superstitions of medieval sailors as a metaphor.[77] Mrs. Severance believes in psychoanalysis "a little, yes. Like the old woman and ghosts. I may not believe in it but I'm afraid of it, rather."[78] Mrs. Severance's hair had "the shine of 'Murray's red gold' in a border ballad."[79] Ted, resolved on an honest confession of his past, says in the popular slang of the gambler, "I'd rather shoot the works on one roll and crap than use the sort of dice that behave."[80] Oliver, trying to save Ted from Mrs. Severance, felt like "Jonathan when the Saul in question was behaving a good deal like David in the affair with Uriah the Hittite's spouse."[81]

Jean Huguenot. In his third novel, Benét tells the story of a girl reared in a little Southern town, who loves a budding writer. The youth feels that he would be hindered by a wife, and leaves her. Jean, on the rebound, marries a college professor who represents security,

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[76] Ibid., p. 58.
[77] Ibid., p. 65.
[78] Ibid., p. 66.
[79] Ibid., p. 116.
[80] Ibid., p. 190.
[81] Ibid., p. 222.

but who soon proves stodgy, unromantic, and more devoted to his profession than he is to his wife. The child which is their only tie dies, and Jean deserts her husband for an impulsive Parisian automobile race driver. Her lover is killed in the first World War, but leaves an illegitimate child by an unmarried French girl. Jean enters a French brothel to earn enough money to maintain her lover's child, then adopts it and feels that this is her reason for being.

Improbable and weak as the story is, still it has elements of folklore which are interesting in a study leading to Benét's more mature work. The myth of the Old South hovers over the little town where Jean grows up, and is kept alive largely by a friend of the Huguenot family, Major Thomas Audrey.[82] Folk speech of the South is pronounced in Jean's conversations as a child, diminishing as she grows older in places far-removed from her home town. She says, "I 'clare to goodness," "I just wish I was po' white," "I kiss up to God I don't know what Aunt Eve's talking about, sometimes."[83] The influence upon her of Negro folk superstition is evident when Jean decides that a misshapen doll "should be her voodoo, as a certain dirty glass bottle full of herbs and red flannel rags and dried

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[82] Stephen Vincent Benét, Jean Huguenot (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1923), p. 5.

[83] Ibid., p. 8.

bits of flesh was Mammy Cecily's."[84] She goes through a childish ritual of "worship" and appeal to the fetish and sings:

> "Swing low, sweet Voodoo," she chanted,
> "Comin' for to carry me home,
> Swing low, sweet Voodoo-oo,
> Comin' for to carry me home."[85]

The simile of superstition found so frequently in Benét's work is exemplified in the statement that Aunt Eve's meditations are "like a ghost playing patience with ghostly cards."[86]

The classical myth drawn upon so freely in The Beginning of Wisdom finds somewhat incongruous use in this novel. As a child, Jean has the romantic idea of reviving, with her friend, Alice, "the tribe of Amazons."[87] And, as Jean grows older, she "felt herself live, she knew herself to grow and flourish, not Narcissa-wise. . . but with a larger carelessness, a more tart concern."[88]

More appropriate are the homely folk materials native to the village, such as the time when "out on King street a convict gang was mending the road to the singing

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[84] Ibid., p. 22.

[85] Ibid., p. 25.

[86] Ibid., p. 27.

[87] Ibid., p. 35.

[88] Ibid., p. 36.

of their chantyman--a mournful song that had to do with yallah roses, and the price of muh ba-aby's hat."[89] From the soil also come the description of chaperons at a dance: "The chaperons huddle sleepily in their chairs--tired turkeys sitting on a fence rail under an April drizzle."[90] Around the village, the countryside is "a puffy patchwork quilt of umber and earth color."[91] The patchwork quilt or crazy quilt metaphor, for land or a map, was to be used several times in John Brown's Body. Quite appropriate to the small town in a period well acquainted with its Bible is a proverbial saying used by one of the characters, "juster than Solomon."[92] To Jean, the world was "deep and wide," qualities which to her were expressed in the song:

> Oh, the Mississippi River it's so doggone deep and
> I said deep and
> I meant wide!
> Oh, the Mississippi River it's so doggone deep and wi-i-de![93]

The language of superstition is employed again when we are told that Jean and her aunt, during the latter's illness, achieved the intimacy of "two goblins playing together under the same shadow."[94]

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[89] Ibid., p. 38.
[90] Ibid., p. 40.
[91] Ibid., p. 53.
[92] Ibid., p. 56.
[93] Ibid., p. 64.
[94] Ibid., p. 70.

Quite irresistible to Benét at this early stage was the temptation to use classical mythology. Even when he apparently recognized that it was unsuited to his character, he was inclined to bring it in on the author's responsibility. This awkward tendency is shown when, at a turning point in her life, "If Jean had known enough about mythology, she would have put the next six months under the protection of Janus, that crossroads god with one face looking forward and another looking back."[95]

A lynching is one of the incidents of the narrative, and it is caused in part by "the race antagonism that simmered always like a witch-broth between the Negro quarter of St. Savier. . . ."[96] Aunt Eve's condition declines, and Cecily, the Negro servant, is "skeered that chahyut's swingin' low foh Miss Eve!"[97] After her aunt's death, and Jean's marriage and removal North, "St. Savier grew as ghost-like as sea-mist."[98]

And so does Benét's feeling for folklore. Jean has grown to womanhood in an atmosphere saturated with regional folk materials, but with her marriage her portrayal changes so that never again does she exhibit habits of speech revealing her origin. The very few subsequent

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[95] Ibid., p. 82.

[96] Ibid., p. 100.

[97] Ibid., p. 107.

[98] Ibid., p. 113.

uses of folk materials involve other persons, or expressions in the author's own person, or types of folk material not expressive of the South.

When Jean's daughter, little Eve, asks "What are stars?", her grandmother "would tell the fable of Weedle the Star-Fairy who makes the stars out of children's defunct good deeds."[99] Little Eve plays with her cousins "like a changeling teaching three village children mild magic," and she causes them to act out a fairy tale about a dragon and an imprisoned princess.[100] After the death of Jean's lover in Paris, the protagonist of the novel is in a confused state, and thinks--in terms of the mixed-up nursery-rhyme:

> There was a young lady who lived in a blur;
> She had so many selves she didn't know which was her.[101]

While unconscious after a suicide attempt, Jean dreamed that she was dead and buried, and that she could see supernaturally up through the earth and the grass. There she could see the shoes of all the men who had ever loved her, as they stood around her grave, and could hear their voices as each pronounced his final judgment upon her.[102]

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[99] Ibid., p. 154.

[100] Ibid., p. 167.

[101] Ibid., p. 254.

[102] Ibid., pp. 267-272.

Recovering, she adopts little Hugues, her lover's child, and attempts to express her sense of having found the ultimate purpose of her existence, in these words: "Perhaps I've found the nigger in the woodpile."[103] The figure of speech is singularly inappropriate, of course, since it is used normally to mean the discovery of an underhanded act, reason, attitude or motive.

Spanish Bayonet. In 1926, Stephen Vincent Benét produced his fourth and possibly best novel, Spanish Bayonet. In the interest it manifests toward the theme of American Independence, it stands as a forerunner of such strongly patriotic works as Western Star, Listen to the People, and many of his short stories. It was only two years until he was to publish John Brown's Body, with its intense interest in American history, and apparently as early as Spanish Bayonet Benét had begun to be obsessed with that strong sense of native values which he was to display so strongly in his later work.

The narrative is an account of the making of an American at the time of the Revolution. Andrew Beard, a young New Yorker whose father was a loyalist and whose brother one of the "sons of liberty," is sent to the British colony of Florida on business for his father, a wealthy merchant. He is the guest of Dr. Gentian and

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[103] Ibid., p. 291.

family--a den of human vipers who hate and conspire against each other. Overwhelmed by the physical loveliness of the daughter, Sparta, Andrew is engaged to her until he learns she is plotting with Cave, the overseer, to inspire a revolt of the foreign laborers and take over the plantation. In the meantime, Andrew's friendship with Sebastian, a Minorcan laborer, and his countrymen who are being denied their rights to free land under a labor contract with Dr. Gentian, leads him to sympathize with the Minorcans. By insensible degrees, this sympathy with the underdogs on a Florida indigo plantation leads him to identify himself with the rebels in the northern colonies.

The folk elements which go into this novel may be divided into those which portray the Spanish Minorcans, those used to depict the Gentians, and those used to characterize Andrew. The most colorful of these three types is the first. The story opens with a prelude laid in the island of Minorca, on the eve of departure of colonists for Florida. There are strolling singers at Easter, receiving sweetmeats and pastries through opened lattices and shutters.[104] The Minorcans engage in a folk dance, in which the onlookers cry, "Long live the dancers," and the dancers reply, "Long live the onlookers."[105]

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[104] Stephen Vincent Benét, Spanish Bayonet [1926,] in Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1942), II, 113.

[105] Ibid., p. 115.

> Presently one of the bystanders called out to him gayly in the permissible words, "Say a word to her! Say a word to her!" He responded mechanically in the set and ancient compliment, "What would you have me say to her but that she has the face of a rose?" and there was a clapping of hands.[106]

Sebastian, Andrew's Minorcan friend on the Florida plantation, is infuriated when Cave kills his monkey. He places the pet's body, along with a medal bearing the Virgin's image, and Andrew's knife, between two candles. He prays, the prayer being a form "peculiar to the men of the islands and unacknowledged by Rome. . . he was dedicating Andrew's knife to Our Lady of Vengeance."[107]

Mrs. Gentian tells Andrew of a custom of the Spaniards in St. Augustine known as "Shooting the Jews."

> On the Saturday morning after Good Friday, when the bells sang hallelujah from the Cathedral, the Spanish inhabitants would shoot at straw dummies labelled Judas and Caiphas, hung up at the corners of certain streets.[108]

Some of the most interesting folklore of Spanish Minorca is the variety of proverbs employed. The Minorcan girl, Caterina, says, "Touch a Greek and you touch a rat."[109] Sebastian says, "We are always between God's fingers."[110] The conversation between Andrew and Sebastian turned to the revolt in Massachusetts: "'When the ass is spurred

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106 Ibid., p. 116.

107 Ibid., p. 167.

108 Ibid., p. 181.

109 Ibid., p. 187.

110 Ibid., p. 197.

too hard it tries to kick off its rider,' said Sebastian, who has proverbs in his blood."[111] And, as Andrew makes up his mind to cast his lot with the rebels, Sebastian says, "There are three things one cannot run away from--war, love and death."[112] Sebastian shares the folk superstition as to the proper way to kill witches and wizards. After Andrew has tried unsuccessfully to shoot Dr. Gentian, "'you should have had a silver bullet,' said Sebastian. 'People like that are not killed with steel or lead.'"[113]

Folklore makes a significant contribution in interpreting the sinister members of the Gentian family. Dr. Gentian, trying to exchange his soul for evil wisdom, is an example.

> "Am I not an initiate? Have I not heard the goat cry in the dark and scattered the herb in the fire? . . . I will not fool myself with crystals and black wafers--these things are folly, but there is something left--something beyond the speculum--behind the glass. I will give my soul for it, I tell you --I will give my soul for it." Now the tones were those of a merchant driving a canny bargain. "I can give you a thousand souls. You are foolish not to bargain with me. Come out of the fire, Baphomet--Baphomet--" the voice reached a shriek of supplication. "Come out of the fire, Baphomet, and buy my souls!"[114]

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[111] Ibid., p. 198.

[112] Ibid., p. 214.

[113] Ibid., p. 196.

[114] Ibid., p. 190.

The superstition in the family is not confined to the doctor. On the night of the plantation laborers' revolt, Mrs. Gentian advises her husband not to go out, and says, "There's a shadow on your back tonight." Convinced of her supernatural second sight, he says, "I think you have the gift tonight. . . . See for me, my dear." But she refuses: "I haven't had a sight for years."[115] The doctor goes toward the plantation guardhouse: ". . . the moon had a bright face tonight--the features of the man in it were distinct. He thought of the old story and smiled."[116] The personality of the daughter, Sparta, which on first sight is very attractive to Andrew, is made more so by her suggestion that she sing for him such old folk favorites as "Charley Over the Water," or "Bobby Shaftoe."[117]

More important to the reader, however, are the reactions of Andrew Beard, since the story is seen through his eyes. Like so many of Benét's heroes--Philip in The Beginning of Wisdom, Oliver in Young People's Pride, and Jack Ellyat in John Brown's Body, Andrew is from a cultured family, and is well educated. To this type of character, Benét gives a faculty for alluding to that kind of folklore most appropriate to the well educated: classical mythology,

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[115] Ibid., p. 215.

[116] Ibid., p. 219.

[117] Ibid., p. 130.

oriental tales and such manifestations of the supernatural as ghosts and mermaids. Andrew is no exception. The most human, down-to-earth folk allusion is in regard to memories of his childhood in New York, including the playmate, Gerrit Jans, who told him "of the wonders of St. Nicholas who stuffed the wooden shoes of godly little boys in Holland with crullers and toy windmills and silver skates on his name-day."[118] Aside from this, his reactions take forms that are pretty well forecast by the fact that he reads Pope's translation of Homer, "where Hector bids Andromache farewell in the choicest of Addisonian English."[119] Andrew sees Mrs. Gentian embroidering "with a needle tiny as a fairy's spear."[120] In her early relations with Andrew, Sparta had been "distant as a ghost."[121] But when he falls in love with Sparta, Andrew feels "a bronze call, the call of a centaur's hunting horn, in his heart."[122] The unreality with which Andrew views Sparta after he discovers her intrigue with Cave is indicated by his attitude as he starts to her room--"he was going there to sleep with

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[118] Ibid., p. 120.

[119] Ibid., p. 122.

[120] Ibid., p. 137.

[121] Ibid., p. 155.

[122] Ibid., p. 161.

a ghost."[123] Andrew's conception of God is a form of folk myth, created through childhood associations.

> To him God was something vague to pray to, for happiness or against the approach of pain--something which might be there. God was a cushioned pew and a prayer-book and a clergyman in robes as opposed to a hard pew and a long hymn and a preacher in a black Geneva gown. He had never thought much about God except as a superior kind of Archbishop of Canterbury who sat on a cloud and looked at Papists sternly.[124]

In the plantation prison, "the image of Dr. Gentian that towered in Andrew's mind like a genie rising from a bottle in a blue, magic fume, diminished gradually."[125] Even after Andrew has learned the full measure of Sparta's deception, he has to admire the sight of her in the moonlight--in classical terms:

> . . . the dark handkerchief capped her head as smoothly and reticently as a helmet--she looked like the merciless genius of combat itself, neither man nor woman nor spirit, but something arisen out of the ground with an arrow in its hand. He could see her standing in a chariot, Hippolyta, the amazon queen with the maimed and iron breast, wrapped in the glittering fleece of a golden ram and urging her cloud-born horses like harnessed gods across the tarnished bodies of the dead.[126]

The Minorcan girl, Caterina, is killed in the plantation revolt, and at the cremation of her body it seemed to

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[123] Ibid., p. 184.

[124] Ibid., p. 197.

[125] Ibid., p. 213.

[126] Ibid., p. 225.

Andrew that the "driftwood burned eerily with ghosts of blues and greens, strange as the colors of an enchanter's rose."[127] The cremation was accompanied by the crash of breakers on the beach, "repeated at even intervals like the firing of minute guns for the burial of a mermaid queen in a tomb of coral and weed."[128] Andrew is never able to define his feelings for Caterina--"There had been a spell between them--an incantation--it had worked itself out and passed--gone back beyond the moon."[129]

James Shore's Daughter. Benét's last novel, coming in 1934, cannot add to his reputation as a writer. Thematically, it has certain digressions which spoil what chance there might have been for a unity of interest. However, in the main, the book can be described as the unsuccessful love of an expatriate American in Europe for the daughter of a financial baron of the final phase of the gilded age. The daughter inherits a passion for power and success from her father, who made his money in western copper mines. The dissolution of the society which Violet Shore came to dominate and the financial ruin of the man she married seem to symbolize in the mind of Garry Grant the end of an era--painful, but possibly forecasting

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127 Ibid., p. 239.

128 Ibid., p. 240.

129 Ibid., pp. 256-257.

something better. The love which he holds for Violet during many years, and which threatens to wreck his marriage, finally dissolves as he sees James Shore's thirst for power gradually crowd out the youthful freshness of his daughter.

The book has little of American folk material. This lack is not surprising, since the protagonist is a man who spends most of his life in France and England. The same distance from the American scene which makes the narrative a poor vehicle for commenting on changes in America, also makes American folklore practically out of the question.

There are a few touches, only, of the folk. James Shore, playing with his daughter, would pretend that he was a prospector who had been snowed in all winter in the Rockies and had just come back to town.[130] Garry's mother was inclined to romanticize the orphaned Violet Shore as a child, making of her "a wholly imaginary character--the lonely, white-faced little princess."[131] Echoes of the West where the Shores made the beginnings of their fortune are in Violet's recollection that her Aunt Amy "used to dance all night, when they had a house-raising."[132] Violet

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[130] Stephen Vincent Benét, James Shore's Daughter (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1934), p. 22.

[131] Ibid., p. 25.

[132] Ibid., p. 65.

also remembers "a bad woman in Gunflint. . . she lived unrespected but handsome and died with her boots on."[133] That type of folk character which is the outgrowth of the so-called "comic" papers is used for a simile when Garry, talking to Violet, felt that his voice sounded "like Rodulf Rassendyl's."[134] James Shore in his old age recalls a famous old folk healing institution, the tonics of the medicine show.

> "There was a man with a medicine show, once, selling Kickapoo Spring Tonic," he said, when he had swallowed. "Tastes a little like the same. He claimed it was herbs, in general, dug off Injun graves. But I guess it was the Jamaica ginger that did the work."[135]

In one of the digressions from the central part of the narrative, a friend of Garry, Elsa Sunding, describes the funeral of a former lover in "the country where I was born":

> They will knock three times at the door of the vault, when they put him in there, for that is the custom. Bread, salt, and water in a silver dish and the smell of the fresh-cut fir twigs--oh, I saw it when his father went to the vault--I can remember everything that is done.[136]

Evaluation

Certain things stand out, after a review of the folk materials in Benét's five novels. One of them is

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[133] Ibid., p. 85.

[134] Ibid., p. 88.

[135] Ibid., p. 118.

[136] Ibid., p. 268.

that in all of the novels, the author is indulging in a greater or less amount of sentimental self-analysis. He seems absorbed in heroes who are mirrors of himself. Like him, his protagonists often were youths who were of good family, well-educated, engaged in writing as a career, suffered from impaired health, tried in vain to get into military service, lived for a time in France. It would be difficult to establish as a fact the suggestion that the inner conflict of the characters were also Benét's, but since external resemblances are the same, the supposition has at least a measure of probability. Especially can we see the growing interest in America and Democracy which was to rule Benét's later writings, in young Andrew, of Spanish Bayonet. Andrew gradually draws away from Tory sympathies toward a belief in the cause of the American colonists and in their aspirations for freedom. So, likewise, was Benét's egocentric self-analysis of his early years to give way to a broader concern for the attributes and interests of certain sections of the country, and of the country and people as a whole. This evolution is seen in the great jump from the outlook in such a novel as Young People's Pride to the perspective of "The Devil and Daniel Webster," "The Diehard," John Brown's Body, Western Star, and the radio scripts which seek to get to the roots of Americanism and democracy.

The lack of a great interest in America, in democracy, and in patriotic ideals is in itself a characteristic of the novels which stands out in marked contrast to his later work. Spanish Bayonet is the only exception to this early characteristic. This situation has a direct relation to the manner in which folk materials are used. The folk element in the novels as a whole is decidedly classical, or is in the tradition of other types of bookish folklore. Even the indigenous folklore is not used with the same significance. In The Beginning of Wisdom the column of labor radicals yells "John Brown's Body" at the top of its lungs largely as a matter of vociferous protest against being herded into camp. In the poem, John Brown's Body, the song is used as a symbol of almost religious idealism. Also in The Beginning of Wisdom, the knowledge of "all the underground folk ballads" was simply an accomplishment of "the battery funny man." In John Brown's Body, however, the folk songs are made to stand for Melora Vilas and her father, and all the footloose, wandering persons on the road after the Civil War. Negro folk materials progress from mere quaintness in Jean Huguenot to a means of expressing a deep aspiration for freedom in John Brown's Body.

A third change which is significantly revealed by a study of the early novels in not merely a trend toward

democracy as a political condition, but a general movement toward recognition of the interest of the masses, even the lowest classes. This growth can be seen in the use of folk materials. The absorption of the early novels with classical allusions has been mentioned already. In fact, some passages are padded with reference to classical mythology with a fervor which is almost neo-classical. But in his later short stories and poetry, Benét could take the lore of the poorest, most illiterate groups and see in them something of significance. Examples are the use of homely dance tunes in "The Mountain Whippoorwill," and the use of cheap rhymes of the English street ballad singers to show the great urge toward American colonization, in Western Star. What the people have thought and believed, as it affects the story of mankind, obviously jumps from a very minor place in the early novels to a role of major importance in his later work. Spanish Bayonet marks a midway point in which the Minorcan plantation workers' lives are controlled to a very great extent by proverbs and other folk wisdom. However, the large use of classical folklore in the early work cannot be discounted as insignificant. There is more than a possibility that Benét's knowledge of classical mythology may have led him to a greater appreciation of the values to be found in indigenous mythology.

It may be suggested, finally, that there may have been some relation between the increasing use of folk materials, and the abandonment of the novel form. The latter requires a high degree of realistic interpretation. Poetry, on the other hand, is traditionally a more appropriate vehicle for imaginative flights. As folklore, with its excursions into the imaginative side of the folk, came to represent more and more to Benét a useful factor in his writing, there may have been, as a result, a conscious or unconscious drift away from the novel.

CHAPTER VII

PROPAGANDA

A Writer's Part in Wartime

Stephen Vincent Benét came of a military family. He was born in 1898, the same year the United States entered one war, and was prevented only by poor eyesight from serving as a soldier in another war. It was, then, fitting that he should serve his country in a major capacity during World War II.

The main reason for Benét's prominent part in patriotic propaganda is found in his intense belief in the principles of democracy and in the ideals of America. It was not a belief born merely of wartime enthusiasm. Long before the nation as a whole saw the danger which threatened the world in the rising tide of totalitarianism, Benét was writing his "nightmare" poems and other verse and stories which staunchly upheld the virtues of democratic government.

So, when Benét was asked by the Office of War Information and other Federal agencies to assist in propaganda work, it was not surprising that he gave generously of his time. There was other work he wanted to do. Much of it, such as the completion of Western Star, might have been of more lasting literary significance. And there is

a distinct possibility, with his health already impaired, that the strenuous nature of his wartime work hastened his death and made him in effect a war casualty.

The manner in which he gave unstintedly of his time places him with Philip Freneau and Walt Whitman as a poet who was a literary support of his country in time of crisis. Like Freneau, he designed his propaganda to arouse the nation to the dangers presented by the oppression of the enemy. Like Whitman, he exalted the beauties of democracy and the dignity of the individual. To a far greater extent than either he made clear the importance of the average American citizen in furthering the conduct of the war. His themes were appreciation of the American heritage, unity of spirit, and determination to produce the supplies and materials of war.

This work is found in a volume of radio scripts, in a thin pamphlet made up primarily of speeches, and in a history of the United States written at the request of the Government for translation into the languages of our allies. It is not the kind of literature which we normally expect from our foremost poets, but it was work which had to be done as part of the effort to preserve the work of those poets and the rest of our democratic civilization. And in spite of the propaganda nature of these last writings, Benét managed to inject a high

literary quality into them, particularly into the radio scripts. A study designed to cover the general field of literary virtues, instead of the more restricted one of folklore in literature, would find definite dramatic and esthetic merits in the radio plays.

This chapter will analyze the propaganda writings for their folklore content, and will make an estimate of the value of the folk element as a means of accomplishing the desired intentions.

Radio Scripts

The radio plays were published after Benét's death, under the title, We Stand United.[1] In a foreword, Norman Rosten wrote:

> We'll miss a few of the old flavors here--the New England smell of apples, the tang of autumn, tall tales with their folk humor and wisdom. . . Benét's radio scripts tell us what he has always told us; that as a nation we are strong, that our ancestors have given us a heritage as deep as the bone and we have fought for it and will fight again.[2]

Despite Mr. Rosten's judgment that the radio scripts are lacking in folk element, examination shows that a very considerable part of the effect is gained by popular style and materials. The fact that none of the scripts center upon a folk subject, as does "The Devil and Daniel

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[1] Stephen Vincent Benét, We Stand United and Other Radio Scripts (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1944).

[2] Ibid., p. viii.

Webster," possibly has led Mr. Rosten to undervalue the definite use of less apparent materials of a similar nature.

The "Adolf" letters. The "Dear Adolf" series, a part of this collection, consists of six dramatized letters to Adolf Hitler, from a farmer, a business man, a working man, a housewife and mother, an American soldier, and a foreign-born American.[3] They were broadcast over National Broadcasting Company Red Network on successive Sunday afternoons beginning June 21, 1942.

The letter from a farmer, expressing the determination of rural America to produce the food necessary to win the war, leans heavily upon the folk speech natural to the rural areas. The narrator says that it was "kind of boiling and steaming up in me to say a few things,"[4] uses the expletive "shucks,"[5] and says "you hitched up the wrong horse when you thought that farmers can't fight, Adolf."[6] He condemns "your goings-on across the water," and says that "you started spreading all over Europe like a mess of tent-caterpillars. . . ."[7]

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[3] Ibid., pp. 9-67.

[4] Ibid., p. 11.

[5] Ibid., p. 12.

[6] Ibid., p. 13.

[7] Ibid., p. 14.

He is somewhat contemptuous of "this Mussolini that you've got cooped up in Italy like a broody hen."[8] As for the food needed by American soldiers, "They'll get it if I have to bust myself wide open,"[9] because America is "too big for puny affairs and small potatoes."[10]

The business man's letter, concerned with war production, is understandably leaner in folk speech than that of the farmer. Yet, he says, "We're against you and we're out to lick you, come hell or high water."[11] War business is "as full of troubles as Pandora's box."[12] As for the business men of Germany, Hitler "stole them blind."[13] "Sure, we kick about a lot of things here,"[14] he says, but he is glad he is not in Germany where he would get shot for kicking.

The working man's letter is a message from "the working stiffs of America."[15] "We don't like the bunk and

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[8] Ibid., p. 16.

[9] Ibid., p. 17.

[10] Ibid., p. 20.

[11] Ibid., p. 22.

[12] Ibid., p. 24.

[13] Ibid., p. 25.

[14] Ibid., p. 25.

[15] Ibid., p. 30.

the oil and the big words. We don't like star-spangled orations that don't add up,"[16] the letter says, but adds that the working men have an eloquence all their own--the production of all the American weapons needed. Vivid reality is introduced in such expressions as the "hot bed" which is kept warm by three shifts of men sleeping in it, and the "high iron" where American construction laborers do their defense work.

The letter from the housewife and mother has much that is in the folk tradition, from the viewpoint of women. For example:

> Women who went with the armies, like Clara Barton,
> Women of wilderness trails, like Rebecca Boone,
> Builders of homes on the prairie, like Sarah Lincoln.[17]

The struggle for equal rights has been slow, the narrator says, but points out that equal responsibilities are an old story:

> But from Plymouth Rock, the women went with the men,
> And not as toys or chattels. They worked and shared,
> They knew who took the brunt of the pioneering,
> The women who bore their children on clipper ships,
> The women who kept the half-faced camps in the cold,
> And they were free women and their strain is in us
> And shall go on.[18]

These lines have overtones of the folk tradition of the frontier--the legends that grow up around migrations,

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[16] Ibid., p. 32.

[17] Ibid., p. 44.

[18] Ibid., p. 45.

> radio sets and are crazy about the comics--Bat Man and Terry and the Pirates and Donald Duck and all kinds of people who do things they aren't supposed to do.[23]

The letter compares the super-deeds of unbelievable comic characters with the accomplishments of the United States armed forces. But the essentially peaceful attitude of America, despite its necessary effectiveness in war, is revealed when the letter continues:

> And when it's over and the bands start playing--they're just as likely to play "Don't Sit Under the Appletree" as they are "The Star-Spangled Banner." Because we're that way.
>
> We kid about things that mean a lot to us. We make wisecracks about generals and presidents. We say, "Don't give us the oil" when we mean business. And we mean business now.[24]

Folk expressions are used, also, in reference to "the Nipponese pals you sicked on us," and in the statement that "We think one man's as good as the next and maybe better."[25]

The letter of the foreign-born American, quite logically, has little American folk material. It is interesting, however, in its use of a paraphrase from a saying widely current in the traditions of the Christian religion. The foreign-born citizen, recalling the struggles of thousands to get to a land of opportunity, says, "With

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[23] Ibid., p. 55.

[24] Ibid., p. 55.

[25] Ibid., p. 57.

a great price we bought this freedom."[26] The original Biblical expression was "With a great sum obtained I this freedom."[27]

Turning from "Dear Adolf" to the other scripts, we find "Thanksgiving Day, 1941,"[28] almost entirely lacking in folk materials. Such a script would seem to be a logical place for legends and traditions of the people, but it was broadcast on November 19, 1941, when war seemed to many to be imminent. It was fitting that merry-making should be suppressed in favor of a sober, yet thankful outlook. The script was read by Brian Donlevy, over the National Broadcasting Company Red network. The most pronounced folk allusion is the statement that "it's turkey day and pumpkin pie day. . . the whole family's day--the whole people's day."[29]

Other scripts. "A Time to Reap"[30] was broadcast over the Columbia Broadcasting System's network November 26, 1942, for the Office of War Information. It opens with a quotation from Ecclesiastes, from which the title is taken:

> To everything there is a season--and a time to every purpose under the heavens--a time to be

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[26] Ibid., p. 66.

[27] Acts of the Apostles (Authorized Version) 22:28.

[28] Benét, We Stand United, pp. 69-73.

[29] Ibid., p. 72.

[30] Ibid., pp. 75-95.

born and a time to die--a time to plant--and a time to reap--[31]

Voices from all parts of the nation are introduced to show the widespread importance of agriculture in wartime, one of them using an expression of the folk when he says, "Just ask where the tall corn grows."[32] The narrator, speaking of the urgent need for food, says, "And it isn't a come-day, go-day, God-send-Sunday job to raise it."[33] A mid-west voice recalls that in the early days, grasshoppers "ate everything but the clothes off your back, and some say they tried those."[34] The militant spirit of America which made its people willing to undergo a revolution to obtain freedom is emphasized by a voice singing, to the accompaniment of a fife and drum:

> Yankee Doodle came to town,
> Riding on a pony,
> He stuck a feather in his hat
> And called him macaroni.

And a male chorus joins in:

> Yankee Doodle, keep it up,
> Yankee Doodle Dandy--
> Mind the music and the step--[35]

The determination of the Revolutionary soldier, despite his hardships and his occasional threats to desert, is

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[31] Ibid., p. 77.

[32] Ibid., p. 78.

[33] Ibid., p. 79.

[34] Ibid., p. 79.

[35] Ibid., p. 81.

expressed in the comment, "But you ain't made tracks for home yet."[36] Echoes of folk songs such as are found in "Chicken in the Bread Tray," and in "Old Man River" ("bow that back") are heard in a passage which also in some parts has the rhythm of square dance calls:

> FARM VOICE: Strike it up on your fiddle, Billy. . .
> [Music: Key chords and into song]
> VOICE [singing]: Troopers need truck man, scratch that ground
> Get your hands in a stalk and your back bowed down.
> CHORUS: Ain't got a rifle, only got a hoe
> But will we let the troops starve? No, chile, no!
> VOICE: Get your back bowed down so the folks can say
> He bowed his back for the U. S. A.
> CHORUS: Scrouge your hands raw now--hide and all--
> Won't need 'em no way till next fall.
> VOICE: Ain't got a rifle, ain't got a gun,
> But I'll break my back till this war gets won.
> CHORUS: Hack at that Axis! Use your hoe!
> Gonna let the troops starve? No, chile, no![37]

"They Burned the Books"[38] was broadcast May 11, 1942, over National Broadcasting Company's network, under the auspices of the Council on Books in Wartime, and the Writers' War Board. This radio drama has little that is characteristically folk, but it does invoke the voices of writers long dead. Schiller, Heine, Milton, Swift, Whitman, Hugo, Tennyson and Clemens, ghost-like, speak from the grave in defense of freedom of thought.[39]

"The Undefended Border"[40] was broadcast December 18,

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[36] Ibid., p. 82.
[37] Ibid., p. 90.
[38] Ibid., pp. 97-117.
[39] Ibid., p. 114.
[40] Ibid., pp. 119-134.

1940, on the Cavalcade of America series of programs, National Broadcasting Company Red Network. Raymond Massey played The Border Voice, which acted as narrator to create a framework corresponding to the physical staging in conventional drama. This radio script creates a pseudo-folk myth, in which the friendship of an American and a French-Canadian, on the border of the United States and Canada, leads to the drafting and signing of the Rush-Bagot treaty which demilitarized that border. This romantic version departs from fact, which is that the negotiations were started even before Rush and Bagot themselves discussed a possible treaty.

> While Adams was still an American minister in London he brought before the British government a proposal that an agreement should be made in regard to naval armaments on the lakes. . . [in 1817] signed letters were exchanged between Bagot and Rush, the Secretary of State. It was agreed that each country should be allowed one vessel on Lake Ontario, two on the upper lakes, and one on Lake Champlain.[41]

The script also ignores naval armaments on any lake other than Ontario. However, the deeper significance which Benét sought, and the artistic means by which he chose to work, were of more importance than a mere literal recitation of history. The origin of the idea of demilitarization with two individuals who were close friends symbolized the desires of the peoples concerned, and without doubt does

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[41] G. P. de T. Glazebrook, Sir Charles Bagot in Canada (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 4-5.

reflect what were the expressed attitudes of many individuals of the time. The American frontiersman, Jim Hunter, goes to Washington with a folk symbol, an Indian wampum peace belt, from his Canadian friend, Jean-Baptiste, and with folk speech urges the pioneers' desire "to be shut of fighting."[42] The folk symbols for frontier communication are used in saying that the United States-Canadian accord was built with

> . . . the broad ax
> And the shining rails of steel,
> The birchbark of the voyageurs,
> The creaking wagon wheel.[43]

"Listen to the People"[44] was broadcast July 4, 1941, in cooperation with the Council for Democracy, over National Broadcasting Company Blue Network. The production is an estimate of the American democracy, reached through the contribution of many voices representing many segments of the country's population, and through the contrast afforded by a totalitarian voice with proposals for the nazification of the United States. The tone of the entire script is set by the following lines near the end:

> We made this thing, this dream,
> This land unsatisfied by little ways,
> This peaceless vision, groping for the stars,
> . . . . . .

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[42] Benét, We Stand United, p. 130.

[43] Ibid., p. 133.

[44] Ibid., pp. 135-154.

We made it and we make it and it's ours.[45]
We shall maintain it. It shall be maintained.

The voices of the people naturally make use of some speech which may be classified as folk speech. For example, a young radical voice says, "Don't you know it's all done with mirrors and the bosses get the gravy, don't you?"[46] The cavalcade of United States history is symbolized by a reference to "the creaking of the wagons going west,"[47] using the wagon wheel so typical of the songs of frontier Americans on the move. The script also makes use of the colorful local place names which are a part of folk culture--Blue Eye, Rawhide, Santa Claus and Troublesome--and echoes the tall tale, or sectional brag, in mentioning the "people who spit a mile from their front door."[48]

At two wartime Christmas seasons--on December 12, 1942, and on December 20, 1943--National Broadcasting Network broadcast on the Cavalcade of America program a Christmas play, "A Child is Born,"[49] by Stephen Vincent Benét. In the original cast Alfred Lunt played the part of the Innkeeper and Lynn Fontanne played the Innkeeper's Wife. In 1943, the leading roles were played by Helen Hayes and Philip

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[45] Ibid., pp. 153-154.

[46] Ibid., p. 139.

[47] Ibid., p. 144.

[48] Ibid., p. 146.

[49] Ibid., pp. 155-181.

Merivale. The play centers around the household of the inn where Jesus was born, at Bethlehem.

The narrator touches a folk note immediately when he says that his task, even though using the relatively new medium, is in reality an old one.

> It's an old task--old as the human heart,
> Old as those bygone players and their art
> Who, in old days when faith was nearer earth,
> Played out the mystery of Jesus' birth
> In hall or village green or market square
> For all who chose to come and see them there,
> And, if they knew that King Herod, in his crown,
> Was really Wat, the cobbler of the town,
> And Tom, the fool, played Abraham the Wise,
> They did not care. They saw with other eyes.
> The story was their own--not far away,
> As real as if it happened yesterday,
> Full of all awe and wonder yet so near,
> A marvellous thing that could have happened here
> In their own town--a star that could have blazed
> On their own shepherds, leaving them amazed,
> Frightened and questioning and following still
> To the bare stable--and the miracle.[50]

Not only is this prologue reminiscent of English folk culture of several centuries ago, but the songs used in the play also are modeled after old folk carols. The innkeeper's wife sings:

> In Bethlehem of Judea
> There shall be born a child,
> A child born of woman
> And yet undefiled.
>
> He shall not come to riches,
> To riches and might,
> But in the bare stable
> He shall be Man's light.

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[50] Ibid., pp. 157-158.

He shall not come to conquest,
The conquest of kings,
But in the bare stable
He shall judge all things.

King Herod, King Herod,
Now what will you say
Of the child in the stable
This cold winter day?

I hear the wind blowing
Across the bare thorn,
I fear not King Herod
If this child may be born.[51]

A folk influence also is evident in the shepherds' song, with its phrasing from traditional carols, its gayety, and its refrains:

[Music, changing into a shepherd's carol]
1ST SHEPHERD: As we poor shepherds watched by night
CHORUS: With a hey, with a ho.
1ST SHEPHERD: A star over us so bright
We left our flocks to seek its light
CHORUS: In excelsis deo,
Gloria, gloria,
In excelsis deo.
1ST SHEPHERD: We left our silly sheep to stray,
CHORUS: With a hey, with a ho.
1ST SHEPHERD: They'll think us no good shepherds, they.
And yet we came a blessed way.
CHORUS: In excelsis deo,
Gloria, gloria,
In excelsis deo.
1ST SHEPHERD: Now how may such a matter be?
CHORUS: With a hey, with a ho.
1ST SHEPHERD: That we of earth, poor shepherds we,
May look on Jesus' majesty?
And yet the star says—"It is He!"
2ND SHEPHERD: It is He!
3RD SHEPHERD: It is He!
CHORUS: Sing excelsis deo!
Gloria, gloria
In excelsis deo![52]

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[51] Ibid., p. 159.

[52] Ibid., pp. 172-173.

"Your Army"[53] was one of thirteen programs produced in cooperation with the United States government and broadcast over the four major networks on thirteen consecutive Saturday evenings beginning February 14, 1944. The principal voice in "Your Army" was that of Tyrone Power. The script was aimed to reproduce the spirit of the American Army, from the time of the Revolution up to the present. Use is made of songs which have been part of the common tradition of the American Army, and which have become a part of the folk consciousness. Early in the script, a chorus sings: "Oh, it's hi, hi, hee in the field artilleree. Shout out your numbers loud and strong--one! two!"[54] The militant spirit of 1861 is represented by two songs:

> CHORUS: [singing] We are a band of brothers, devoted to the soil,
> Fighting for the property we gained by honest toil,
> And when our rights are threatened, we loudly cried hurrah
> Hurrah, hurrah for the bonny blue flag that boasts but a single star!
> CHORUS [cutting in] We're coming Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more. . . . [Fading.][55]

The manner of the frontier tall tale teller is utilized when the jeep is made to speak:

> My mother was a tin lizzie and my father was a jack rabbit. I'll cart four men and their stuff

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[53] Ibid., pp. 185-207.

[54] Ibid., p. 185.

[55] Ibid., pp. 188-189.

> and I'll tow machine guns and mortars. I'm a cross-country runner and a bulldog and an armor-plated, hell-before-breakfast get-there--give me room! I've got the jump of a flea and the guts of a terrier and I'm harder to kill than an army mule. That's me--jeep![56]

Benét resisted any tendency there may have been to use the official and technical language of the War Department in characterizing the Army. Instead, he wrote his script on the level of folk speech. His tank commander says, "Let her roll!"[57] In recalling the Mexican War, the well-known campaigns are ignored, to listen to a recruiting sergeant report:

> They's two hundred men with their rifles just come down from the hills of Kentucky! They all want to enlist at once. . . . Hell, they don't want to be swore in! They just want to know where this place called Matamoros is and how soon they can get [fading] there and start shootin'--[58]

The pre-World War II draft was raised "fair and square, by lot and by law."[59] The tendency to call high Army officers "red-tape brass hats" is deplored, and trained professional soldiers are contrasted with "country-club strategists."[60] The private refers to the company commander as "the old man."[61] The men who operate mechanical range-

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[56] Ibid., p. 195.

[57] Ibid., p. 186.

[58] Ibid., p. 188.

[59] Ibid., p. 189.

[60] Ibid., p. 190.

[61] Ibid., p. 191.

computers in anti-aircraft units are referred to as "the juke-box boys."[62] A fifty-five millimeter gun is a personality to the men who operate it. One of a gun crew says, "We call this one Kate Smith. She's a honey."[63] The enlisted man in the Medical Corps refers to himself as a "pill roller."[64] Two-way radio equipment is called a "walkie-talkie" and an Infantry private says he is "Private Dogface," with a "dog-tag" rather than an identification disk.[65] Our enemies, the narrator says, "aren't pushovers."[66] A chorus, in a musical finale, refers to "the leather-necked Army" which will "get what we're fighting for / And it's Hitler's hide on the old barn door."[67] Such violence is in the tradition of the folk epic hero, such as Beowulf.

Speeches and History

A Summons to the Free was a thin pamphlet of short writings, most of them being speeches, published in 1941 when it seemed that America was on the verge of war. "The

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[62] Ibid., p. 193.

[63] Ibid., p. 194.

[64] Ibid., p. 196.

[65] Ibid., p. 197.

[66] Ibid., p. 199.

[67] Ibid., p. 202.

Power of the Written Word"[68] was a speech delivered November 14, 1940, at a meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In speaking of the ability of the American people to see both their own faults and their virtues, he uses folk examples:

> It is this double mood of enthusiasm and self-criticism that has made the American mind. It shows in the folk songs of the people. For, in the march West, you might be singing "O'er the hills in legions boys--Freedom's bright star" --but you might equally well be singing:
>
> "Hurrah for Greer County, the land of the free,
> The land of the grasshopper, rattler and flea,
> I'll sing of its praises, I'll tell of its fame,[69]
> While starving to death on my government claim."

"We Stand United"[70] was the title of a speech written by Benét and delivered by Raymond Massey at a meeting November 6, 1940, in Carnegie Hall, New York, sponsored by the Council for Democracy. The title later was used for a volume of radio scripts, in which it also was included. This was a plea for national unity after the bitter election campaign of 1940. Benét in this speech sought to show the essential unity of Americans through demonstrating that election differences were superficial, just a custom which does not affect underlying

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[68] Stephen Vincent Benét, A Summons to the Free (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1941), pp. 4-12.

[69] Ibid., p. 9.

[70] Ibid., pp. 13-17.

neighborliness. His manner of expressing folk customs fell back, quite naturally, on folk speech:

> You call my candidate a horse-thief and I call yours a lunatic and we both of us know it's just until election time. It's an American custom, like eating corn on the cob. And, afterwards, we settle down quite peaceably. . . .[71]

When Benét wrote America, a simplified history of the United States, it was in response to a request that he produce, as propaganda, a work suitable for translation into the languages of the United Nations. The book is simplified, in the sense that it ignores a great mass of detail which would be confusing to a foreigner of limited scholarship who had not previously studied United States history. However, Benét, despite his love for American ideals and despite the fervor which so often warps wartime propaganda, was not short-sighted enough to write an idealized history. He faces frankly the good and the bad in American events and achievements, but keeps clearly in sight the ideals for which the nation has stood and insists that democracy has made wonderful progress in this country.

From a folk standpoint, the principal example of folk materials would have to be the entire book, no less. It is written in a style which is not bristling with ballads, dialect and folk heroes, but which is of the

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[71] Ibid., p. 14.

earth earthy. Its basic informality is just the opposite of the typical scholarly work. Its style is calculated to appeal to the man in the street in London, Chungking, Rio de Janerio, Paris, Sydney and Oslo. A few examples of phraseology which most obviously draw upon the folk may be cited. At the time of the Revolution, it is said, the colonists, "met, they protested, they got up on their hind feet and yelled."[72] With reference to national politics before the Civil War, we are told that "the slaveholders. . . called the tune."[73] The basic willingness of the American people to take a chance on possible economic improvement is mentioned: "It might be a pot of gold--anything from a city lot in Omaha to a safety pin might be a pot of gold."[74]

Evaluation

Two things emerge with clarity from the propaganda writings of Stephen Vincent Benét. The first is a more positive affirmation than ever before in his writings of the values in the American tradition. Unlike many of his generation, he did not sink into cynical pessimism and pour out depressing testimonials to his disillusionment.

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[72] Stephen Vincent Benét, America (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1944), p. 32.

[73] Ibid., p. 66.

[74] Ibid., p. 82.

The ideals of this country, he made clear in his last writings, are worth maintaining. He could see the shortcomings of America, and could still insist that "as a people I think we try." This attitude was no new one inspired by the war. Years before, in his "nightmare" poems, and in short stories like "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and "William Riley and the Fates," he had recognized the worth of American ideals and had shown an appreciation of the achievements of the American people in trying to live up to those ideals. The propaganda writing simply underscored his previous attitudes.

Second, it is important for the purpose of this study to notice that Benét in his propaganda continued to weave carefully into his work those folk materials which might enhance its values. The reasons for the use of folklore remained much the same as in his previous work, and have been covered in previous chapters. The more significant thing to note is that as folk materials helped him create a more effective poetry and a more striking group of short stories, he did not spare their use in propaganda work. It was one example of a close application to this type of writing of the skill he had exercised in what many might think more worthwhile work. The obvious conclusion is that Benét must have considered the radio scripts and similar writing as being of extremely great importance, worth all his creative effort.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

When the literary historians of the future come to measure Stephen Vincent Benét's artistic stature, they may use a variety of yardsticks. Whether the appreciation of his work will grow with time, or whether it will dwindle, depends upon many standards which are outside the province of this study. But one field in which he must be compared with other American writers, for better or for worse, is the use of folk subjects and forms. He was not content to reproduce folk materials in the highly polished manner of Longfellow, nor was he content to toss such materials out in the rough state which is characteristic of Sandburg. He shows more variety in his folk interests than does Mark Twain.

Findings

Volume and type. Stephen Vincent Benét showed, in his writings, a broad knowledge of virtually every type of folk material. He was born in Pennsylvania, grew up in California and Georgia, attended college in Connecticut, worked in France, and spent the later years of his life in New York. His residence in such widely separated places provided an opportunity for knowledge of regional cultures.

As a youth, he also read voraciously in his father's library. From reading and experience he stored away a wealth of unusual matter. Leonard Bacon says:

> Unexpected facets of some subject that had seemed completely played out, suddenly glitter as he speaks. Some novel implication of what you had supposed a shop-worn system develops with a pleasant inadvertence. Or an idiosyncrasy, unforeseen and entertaining, noted by him, expresses an aspect that had escaped you in some familiar character.[1]

Benét's literary work also was to display these tendencies, and the "unexpected facets" and "idiosyncrasies" often were the homely folk expressions and forms of which he had such a great store.

The myth and lore of classical literature, of Biblical derivation, of Northman, Celt, Indian, African, and the various races which settled America crop out in his prose and verse. He exhibited familiarity with the superstitions, omens, charms, demonology and religions of the mass of people. He used their hero myths, tall tales, ballads, spiritual songs, proverbs, folk speech, nursery stories, treasure legends, ghost stories and fiddle tunes. He incorporated into his writing their quilt patterns, dances, and distinctively regional types of food.

Although his later work was to show far more effective handling of folk materials, his interest in folk culture dates from his earliest writing. Interest in

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[1] Leonard Bacon, "Stephen Vincent Benét," The Saturday Review of Literature, X (April 7, 1934), 608.

classic myth is shown in the titles of such schoolboy work as Five Men and Pompey, and The Drug Shop or Endymion in Edmonstoun. And, in the field of more earthy folklore, his "The Hemp: A Virginia Legend," was published in The Century Magazine while its author was still in school.[2]

Manner of use. The analysis of Benét's work shows that, although he made frequent allusions to the characters and song titles of actual folklore, he rarely reproduced songs and stories. Instead, his method was to make use of manners, forms and feeling to create his own stories and songs. If he needed a pirate, he took one of his own imagination and surrounded him with all the trappings of Teach, Lafitte and countless other buccaneers. If he needed a hymn, he took the style of one imbedded in the folk consciousness--and even took snatches of the phrasing at times--and worked out something distinctively his own, yet still in the popular tradition. His Negro spirituals, sea chanties and London street ballads were composites of their predecessors in real life. He created, in John Brown's Body and Western Star, ballads which would have sounded natural on the Scottish border.

Values

The important matter, of course, is not the amount

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[2] William Rose Benét, "My Brother Steve," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 15, 1941), 3.

of folklore in Benét's writing, or the technical manner of use, but the effectiveness with which it is employed. The dangers in the use of folklore would be, on the one hand, a parroting of the folklore journals merely for the purpose of achieving novelty or quaintness, and, on the other, a distortion of the true spirit of the folk through the flexibility of the author's methods. While some of Benét's early work makes injudicious use of folk materials, the bulk of his writings uses folklore in an effective, appropriate manner.

Suggested defects. The early novels give the impression of being written from an egocentric standpoint. They indicate an author whose vision was limited to what he himself felt, hoped and desired. Not until he reached his later work was Benét's field to broaden and coincide with the interests of the great mass of people. Until then his work was only a limited extent in the manner and the spirit of the folk. Those early novels are characterized by their use of much classical mythology, rather than the lore common to the majority of Americans. Such allusions are often incongruous. The use of classical references was not limited to characters who might be expected to react through that medium, but was found in the words of the author, as he described situations in which more homely metaphor would have been appropriate.

In taking notice of this condition, the false note struck by inappropriate tradition must be viewed as a symptom rather than as a cause. The underlying factor which both made the novels unacceptable and made the folklore appear awkward was something which time and experience removed.

Early lyrical poems--and indeed all Benét's poetry to some extent--falls into certain mannerisms as an outgrowth of his interest in folk themes. The figure of the ghost, for example, took such a firm hold on Benét's imagination that he was over-prone to use the expression on every occasion. Again and again, anything intangible is termed a "ghost," until the reader begins to feel the triteness of the expression.

The final and principal defect which may be suggested is Benét's failure to achieve unity in his longer work. It is one of the principal flaws in Young People's Pride. Unfortunately, Benét had not ironed out this weakness by the time he wrote John Brown's Body and Western Star. The breadth of his canvas in these long poems is not a complete excuse, for Benét failed to make use of available devices which would have provided unity. In regard to this failure to achieve a closely-knit structure, the use of folk materials again is more a symptom than a cause. An eager interest in all phases of America led Benét to attempt to cover much territory.

A wide variety in the folklore encountered in this process, although effective enough and interesting in itself, helps to draw attention to the lack of unity.

Suggested merits. Far outweighing the possible misuse of folklore in some of Benét's work are the positive values which he achieved by deft handling of folk materials. He used them to make real and substantial the characterization of individuals and groups in his long poetic works, short stories, and war propaganda writings. He handles psychological characterizations subtly by making symbols of folk figures and folk themes.

The folk element provides an indirect and effective manner of expressing the author's attitudes toward himself, his hopes, his fears, his associates, and toward life itself. His distrust of the machine age is projected through folk allusions at the end of John Brown's Body. His fear that civilization as we know it is doomed is brought into focus by pseudo-myths in the "nightmare" poems and in some of the short stories. The poetic beauty which is within much of the traditional folk song and story has been transferred to his writing, along with the form itself.

The most outstanding use which Benét has made of these materials is to assist in expressing the social, political and spiritual aspirations of America. Other

writers, by various means, have striven to express a national consciousness. This has ranged all the way from imperialistic flag-waving to the bitterness of disillusion, depending on the writer's conception of his native land. Benét, however, has gone about the same task by seeking what Van Wyck Brooks would call the "usable past" which is our inheritance. Others of the new intellectuals in the 1920's set the pace in literary use of an indigenous culture. Benét started at the same time, with his head in the classical clouds, but his development was marked by a gravitation toward the folk traditions and ideals of his country. It is to his credit that his early trend grew into something related but more fundamental, rather than being exchanged for a blase sophistication. This could have happened, and would have happened with many writers, given Benét's distaste for the gilded age as shown in James Shore's Daughter, and for the machine age as shown in the conclusion of John Brown's Body.

Benét's main contribution to American literature, it seems to me, is to make us aware of our usable past, and this contribution is strengthened and amplified by the folk elements of his works. Although he shows us, by the same means, the interesting variety within the nation, at the same time he emphasizes the fundamental one-ness, and the fundamental values, in American

civilization. The movement of peoples in the path of the "western star" expresses a national sense of search and expectancy. The desire for freedom on the part of Revolutionary colonists and on the part of Negro slaves, is vividly portrayed. The determination to remain free is stressed time after time in his poems, stories and radio drama. A Negro's song about "the promised land" or a pioneer's dislike for being fenced in express more than would a formal and dry political essay. Above all, Benét expressed an abiding faith in democracy and in the people. All these effects which he achieves are in a very real sense the result of his talent for presenting the true spirit of the folk, for they are the things which matter to the folk.

An over-all examination of Benét's work cannot omit mention of the vitality which many critics describe as the characteristic to be derived from literary reliance on folk culture. It is the result of all the other values combined, and something more. It is intangible; it is the approach, the viewpoint, the feeling of the writer as he identifies himself with the reader and with the great mass of humanity. It is hard to point out in specific examples, for it must be felt rather than observed. It is, I believe, present in most of Benét's best writing.

> Steve Benét had that gather-ye-round quality,
> and the folks sure did gather when he spoke!. . .

Stephen Vincent Benét came with his simplicity. He came with the reverence of one chosen to speak to and for the people.[3]

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[3] Norman Rosten, "Foreword," in We Stand United (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1945), p. vii.

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