

THE GREEN SIDE OF LIFE: APPALACHIAN MAGIC AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

Rodger Cunningham¹

In memoriam John Richards

The magical practices of the Southern Appalachian region have attracted attention of various kinds over the decades. There are now, for example, several popular books and websites of varying styles of approach and degrees of reliability devoted to the subject (cf. Richards 27-29). But most of the specifically scholarly attention to the subject has come from folklorists and anthropologists. Leading examples of these studies are Ruth Ann Musick's *Green Hills of Magic: West Virginia Folktales from Europe*; Patrick W. Gainer's *Witches, Ghosts, and Signs: Folklore of the Southern Appalachians*; Anthony Cavender's *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*; and most recently Gerald Milnes' *Signs, Cures, and Witchery: German Appalachian Folklore*. These scholars' works are illuminating in many ways, but they write out of a set or sets of disciplinary assumptions that I think hinder a complete understanding of the subject. This essay will proceed via a critique of these assumptions to an exploration of the real ideational matrix of Appalachian magic and then to an examination of the directions I believe future research on Appalachian magic should take, and why.

The works I have mentioned are different in approach but share certain common attitudes. Musick and Gainer are mainly concerned with recording stories and customs with little theoretical interpretation outside a casual distinction between the rational and the "superstitious." Of the more theoretically oriented approaches, Cavender divides his subjects' folk-medical ideas into the "naturalistic" and the "magico-religious" with a sharpness that does not accord with his actual description of healers' practices, while Milnes essentially relegates his entire subject to the category of the irrational. What these writers have in common (whether explicitly stated or only implicitly informing their presentation of materials) is, first of all, the tendency of folklorists to constitute their object of study by the negative category of "the irrational," whose boundaries in turn constitute "the rational" as the privileged category; and secondly, a Malinowskian functionalism, assimilated to common sense, that sees magic as rooted in

an attempt to “explain the unknown.” This functionalist assumption, of course, entirely begs the question of why people should resort to this *kind* of “explanation”—in short, how magic *actually functions* in a society—or indeed why “explanation” and causal efficacy are assumed to be the basic goals of human thinking and acting in the first place. As a result, these four writers, like many researchers into magic, overlook what I see as the most interesting implications of their own research, implications that the reader must constantly pull in fragments from between the lines: implications, that is, concerning the broader ideas about the cosmos that structure and justify their informants’ practices.

A better approach to magic, I think, is suggested by the Benjaminian anthropologist Michael Taussig:

[Malinowski’s] mode of interpretation is unacceptable because it presupposes most of what needs explaining—the richly detailed motifs and precise configuration of details and meanings that constitute the beliefs and rites in question. Furthermore, *it actively diverts attention from the inner meaning of these phenomena*. This becomes obvious if we ask this question ...: Why is this particular set of ideas, with its pointed meaning and wealth of embedded mythology, chosen in this specific circumstance and time, rather than another set of ideas and practices? Once we raise this question, a different mode of interpretation is suggested. ... Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits, *to explore life and thereby to change its direction*. (14-15; emphasis added)

This quotation points toward the questions I think need to be investigated, neither credulously nor positivistically but in the spirit of what Owen Barfield called “final participation” (Barfield 133-141) and also that of Ashis Nandy’s “critical traditionalism” (Nandy 27-29, 47-48, 62). There is a wide field open, I think, for researchers who will simply ask the right questions about the real meaning(s) of Appalachian magic, as a window into the life-orientation of a people—an essential part of its culture, with “culture” defined not as a bagful of “traits” but as a systematic structure of meanings implying an orientation to the cosmos; in short, a folk ideology and at the same time a specifically spiritual phenomenon, a cosmovision.

And what *is* this cosmovision? Here a phrase used by one of Gerald Milnes' informants is telling. Dana Keplinger, a healer, says of her work, "We dealt with the green side of life" (qtd. in Milnes 112). The Hermetic tradition defines three magical works: the black work of destruction and deathlessness; the white work of rebirth and illumination; and the red work of power over the earth (Evola, part 2 passim). This ancient color triad (and Appalachian magic is strongly triadic, cf. Cavender 44) is also reflected in the Appalachian charms that invoke "God's word and Mary's milk and Jesus' blood" (e.g. Hohman 111); it corresponds as well to the first three colors to be defined in human languages (Berlin and Kay). But the next color to be defined in language is green, which is the complement to red as white is to black. Thus, for example, in the *Popol Vuh* the four roads to the Otherworld are the black, the white, the red, and the green (134), and prayers are offered to be kept on the green road (170, 222). This green work, then—the completion of the quaternion—is the work of participation in Creation; its green is that of St. Hildegard's *viriditas*, and also of the Green Lion, the principle of growing life that Newton tried and failed to find as an abstracted essence, but that exists nevertheless as an implicit and hence inevitably emerging property of—not "matter" or "nature," but of what Whitehead called "the Manifold."

What, then, is the context of this greenness? Considered not as a symbolic but as a social phenomenon, Appalachian magic is bound up with the most traditional strain of Appalachian Christianity. As John Richards says, Appalachian magic and Appalachian religion are inextricable; their believers and practitioners "form a single community with the same history, shared values, and a common worldview" (9; cf. 34-36, 38-43). And Appalachian Christianity is so intrinsic to the people (McCauley 153-155, Richards 33), and so little identified with any external organization, that it has sometimes been invisible to outside observers. As Loyal Jones says, "No group in the country has aroused more suspicion and alarm among mainstream Christians than have Upland Christians, and never have so many missionaries been sent to save so many Christians as has been the case in this region" (Jones 4).

How, therefore, can this religion be characterized, specifically in terms of its shared values and worldview? It is frequently described as backward, superstitious, gloomy, and above all "fatalistic"—a word implicitly defined on "trait"-hunting questionnaires to mean anything outside the most Promethean individualism and optimism (Batteau 12). This kind of language from the usual suspects should clue us in to the fact that it is actually something quite different and valuable.

There are many types of religion, even of Protestant Christianity, represented in Appalachia, but here we are talking about what religious historian Deborah McCauley calls "Appalachian mountain religion," meaning the kind of religion found essentially nowhere else except by out-migration (McCauley 2; cf. Richards 32), and another religious historian, Richard Humphrey, calls "the religion of Zion" (Humphrey 122). Each of these scholars defines it as one of three dominant forms of Protestantism in the region—the other two being evangelicalism and "mainline" Protestantism—and each decries the common tendency to confuse Appalachian mountain religion with evangelicalism and/or fundamentalism (McCauley 467, Humphrey 123), which is profoundly opposed to it in many ways (see esp. Humphrey 131-136). As these scholars, especially Humphrey, explicate Appalachian mountain religion, it incorporates a vision of life rooted in what Jeff Todd Titon calls *husbandry* (Cunningham, Reid, and Titon 863)—in an intimate relation to the land and its seasons, and to place and extended family—and is "dependent on the vision of southern Appalachia as God's promised land" (Humphrey 124), a vision intimately connected to the mountainous nature of the land (124-125). Adherents of this view believe "that they live in the time of the original creation" (125), and their beliefs are full of Christian justifications for planting crops by moon signs (128-29) and other traditionary forms of participation in cosmic processes (whereas fundamentalists are as horrified by magic as they are contemptuous of science). Appalachian mountain religion, therefore, incorporates a mentality that directly contradicts both Max Weber on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, and Lynn White Jr. on the Christian basis of the subjugation of nature. It is, in short, a thoroughgoing "cosmic Christianity," which is precisely why both the mainline liberal churches and the evangelicals-cum-fundamentalists have expended so much effort in eradicating it, out of a hatred based on fear (cf. McCauley 12, 33, 244)—fear of the destabilization of the categories that both other Protestant traditions hold in common.

What are the historical roots of this religion? The cosmovision behind it incorporates elements of Native American and African beliefs (cf. Richards 36), pre-Christian European beliefs, Celtic Christianity, and German pietism (for the latter, see esp. Milnes; also McCauley 156-161). But as the culturally hegemonic ethnic core of Appalachia is "Scotch-Irish" or Ulster Scot, and the basic theme of its indigenous religion is Scotch-Irish sacramental revivalism (McCauley 37), so the core of its attitude toward the cosmos is conditioned by Scotch-Irish Calvinism. Amid the controversies

among the Protestant reformers as to the goodness of the physical world as we find it in general and of mountains in particular—the latter having been an especially controversial point (Nicolson 72-112)—Calvin maintained stoutly that the whole visible cosmos was unfallen and perfectly good except for humanity (Nicolson 96-100; cf. Humphrey 130; Cunningham 91-93; Cunningham, Reid, and Titon 862). Thus Calvinists who settled among mountains may have been at least structurally expressing, and also reinforcing, their belief in the goodness of the nonhuman cosmos (cf. Cunningham 92; Cunningham, Reid, and Titon 862). This view of the goodness of the cosmos is one of two important Calvinist-related features in the indigenous mountain cosmovision, the other being the view that the Creation is God's property, not ours (e.g. Humphrey 140).

In all the above discussion I have been carefully avoiding using the word "nature," and this is for an important reason. Though most investigators of Appalachian magic use the word "supernaturalism" to characterize their subjects' worldview, it is a strictly "etic" term. In fact there is no "supernaturalism" in Appalachian folk ideology because there is no "nature" in it. The word "nature" as a name for the nonhuman environment has no place in Appalachian English, which uses the word only for the "nature" of particular things—or, as an abstraction, as the other not of Man but of Grace. What the standard discourse of modernity calls "nature" is, to mountain people, "the Creation" (cf. Cunningham 97).² And this is all-important because Nature in the modern (post-twelfth-century) sense is "*the concept of a dominated essence and nothing else*" (Baudrillard 55; emphasis original). Thus, by eschewing the concept of "nature," Appalachian folk ideology is a "premodern" way of thinking that rounds on the postmodern and offers no purchase to either technoscientific or evangelical ideas of the "subjection of nature," nor to the commodification of "nature" as an objectified essence. According to this worldview, as part of Creation—God's property—we are not separated from it except by sin, and in any case we are not Creation's lords but its caretakers.

This, then, is what I see as the necessary basis for future research into Appalachian magic. It is part of the same culture, practiced by the same people, and an expression of the same mentality, as Appalachian religion, and scholars of magic need to do for it what has been done for that religion by scholars like Humphrey, Jones, and McCauley. Before these scholars wrote, as Melanie Sovine said, scholars of Appalachian religion often disregarded the fundamental necessity to *study religion as religion* rather

than as an epiphenomenon of something else (qtd. in McCauley 476). The same, unfortunately, can still largely be said of Appalachian magic, and what researchers need to start doing is to take the Appalachian magico-religious complex seriously as an expression of a people's orientation to being-in-the-world.

But to what end? First of all, of course, for its own sake as an addition to knowledge, especially since magical practitioners are dying off in many areas without having been properly approached in this way. But there are other reasons as well, of equal urgency.

As Taussig says, a fundamental purpose of magic is "to explore life and thereby to change its direction." And the direction of things in Appalachia is in dire need of changing. In the name of Progress and Civilization, the region has been under attack from outside economic interests for a century and a quarter, and that attack has targeted Appalachia's cultural and spiritual meanings as an essential part of a program of stealing the region's resources in increasingly destructive ways.

From the top of the mountain behind my campus, I can stand at the foot of an ancient oak tree and look around in all directions to see where half a dozen other mountaintops no longer exist, having been torn off for their coal and dumped into their adjacent valleys. Having removed the resources from the mountains, modern civilization is now destroying the mountains themselves—the physical basis for the traditional culture, with their great significance in its whole cosmovision; the visible embodiment of the connection between the earthly and the heavenly, the congruence of unfallen Creation with its Creator, to say nothing of their importance for the physical life-systems of the region and the planet. Even the tap water on my campus is virtually undrinkable without filtering—modern civilization has poisoned the blood of the earth and is literally poisoning the blood of its inhabitants, the people and their fellow creatures of earth. The process is both scientifically absurd and economically insane, yet its perpetrators commonly defend it with the standard and reflexive rhetoric of "Science and Reason" versus "superstition and emotion." To this technocratic view, many evangelicals and fundamentalists add their own rationalist voice with the assertion that the Earth was "given to us to use."

And as for the people, not only are they impoverished and poisoned by their self-proclaimed benefactors, savers, and enlighteners, but their culture is in danger of being stripped, removed, and erased. It is precisely because mountain people see themselves as part of Creation that modern civilization sees them as part of Nature—nonhumans to be driven from the

land like the Indians they largely replaced and to some extent absorbed; like those Indians, relegated to the past ("yesterday's people!") as a thing that must die, or again, like the Tibetans whose civilization has been invalidated and deemed to have no place in the world as seen by its "rational" masters. And, as in all such cases, first and foremost Appalachian culture must be eradicated because of the deep psychic threat that its alternative poses to the dominant paradigm.

All native Appalachian scholarship, including mine, is like that of other colonized peoples in being engaged with history and praxis. In this context, therefore, Appalachian magico-religious traditions can be seen as a key to a cosmovision and a folk ideology that constitute a *site of resistance* against commoditization (cf. Humphrey 138-139) and what Appalachian historian Herbert Reid calls the technological worldview (cf. Cunningham, Reid, and Titon 863-864). The persistence of essential values (Jones 204-206; cf. Brown) among Appalachian mountain people can not only help Appalachian people themselves resist their oppressors, but if properly made known to the world, it can help shape thought on these issues in general. As one of the last survivors of a thoroughly and originally Western, Christian, and Protestant approach to the cosmos—and one that contradicts most of the assumptions usually attached to these adjectives—it has the potentiality of being a powerful voice added to those already mobilizing the rational, imaginative, and spiritual resources of the world in general toward that resistance.

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ENDNOTES

1 My thanks to the late John Richards and to Michael Newton for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 I hope I will be forgiven for citing my own work in a matter this central to my point. It is my observation from my own native knowledge of Appalachian language use, and it receives nods from my Appalachian students whenever I point it out in class.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

DARNELL ARNOULT, the featured author of the Winter 2007 issue of *Appalachian Heritage*, won the Weatherford Award and the SIBA Award for her first poetry collection, *What Travels With Us*, and is the author of the novel, *Sufficient Grace*. She grew up in Henry County, Virginia, and lives in Smith County, Tennessee.

WENDELL BERRY is one of America's most distinguished and prolific contemporary writers. He farms and writes on the Kentucky River near where it empties into the Ohio. His latest book, *Imagination in Place*, is an essay collection that celebrates writers with strong connections to their communities. *Leavings* is his most recent poetry collection, published last year. It included poems first published in *Appalachian Heritage*.

SAMANTHA COLE is a Berea College student from Lee County, Kentucky, whose primary student labor position is with *Appalachian Heritage*. She is a junior Appalachian Studies major and serves as the editor-in-chief of Berea College's in-house literary magazine, *Carillon*.

ROBERT J. CONLEY has published over eighty books in poetry, story, novel and nonfiction, including the official history of the Cherokee nation and *The Cherokee Encyclopedia*. He currently serves as the Sequoyah Distinguished Professor of Cherokee Studies at Western Carolina University and lives in Sylva, North Carolina. He is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation.

RODGER CUNNINGHAM grew up in Kenova, West Virginia, and currently serves as Professor of English at Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes, Kentucky. He is the author of *Apples on the Flood: Minority Discourse and Appalachia* and of many essays and reviews in the field of Appalachian Studies.

THOMAS FABISIAK is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature and Religion in Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion. He is preparing a dissertation on the reception history of ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. He is from Maine.