Foreword

Given the training and the research methods drawn upon here by Alessandro Falassi in this remarkable monograph, it is tempting to see this study in terms of the best of the Old World joining with the best of the New. Trained in the sociological tradition in Italy, Falassi came to the United States to do further work in folklore with Alan Dundes at the University of California at Berkeley. There he built upon his already profound interest in systems of significance and meaning, that disciplinary place where sociology of knowledge, phenomenology, semiotics, and ethnography come together.

Ironically, the American experience resulted in a return to roots as well, for the Tuscan countryside occasion described here comes from the region of his birthplace. A member of an old Tuscan family (his people have been there seven hundred years), he still calls Castellina in Chianti home, as well as Siena, about ten miles away. His earlier study, *La Terra in Piazza* (with Alan Dundes), addressed the urban traditions of Siena. Here he looks back toward his country heritage, with its very different occasions of performance and celebration. While Sienese life revolves around the Palio, the Tuscan countryman centered his creative energies on the *veglia* described here. The *veglia* is a focused gathering in which Falassi participated often during his growing years. His description is couched in a personal and nostalgic past tense, even though the practice is not totally moribund.

The best of the old and new meet in other ways as well. Folklore scholarship has maintained its integrity as a discipline by a simultaneous interest in the folk and their lore, in traditions as they are

maintained in the lives of people who entertain and instruct, who play and celebrate with each other, especially those who live in communities still based on a simple pastoral or agricultural economy. In the main, this has meant that folklorists have pursued their materials in what used to be called an antiquarian spirit, now renamed cultural or social history. The items of tradition as maintained in performances and other play forms, or in ritual, festival, and ceremonial events, are collected and studied as if they have a meaning of their own apart from the immediate occasion for their enactment. That is, because they have an ontological status of their own achieved because of their traditional usage, they are susceptible to being studied by how they achieve this kind of status, this integrity. Consequently, folklore of the Old School was primarily a matter of collection and analysis in terms of regional distinctiveness and, in the case of extralocal items, by dissemination—and distribution—patterns. This book continues to operate within that scholarly tradition, that outgrowth of romantic nationalism that sought the validification of the spirit of the people through their collective expressions tied to past beliefs and practices.

For some time, however, this romantic and antiquarian approach has been under attack by those more hard-minded rationalists, the ethnographers who are more concerned with the description and elaboration of sociocultural systems as they are to be observed. In such a synchronic, present-oriented view, tradition has little place except as a cultural construct, a fiction of the people being studied. More important to such revisionist-folklorists is the placement of lore within living contexts, attending to the ways in which lore was employed as part of the negotiations carried on by those seeking status or rebelling *carnival style* against such negotiations. In place of the analysis and distribution of texts, this breed of folklorists looks to the constraints and conventions of expressive situations as the way into an understanding of the traditional process. Thus, items exist only in so far as they are given embodiment within specific (if recurrent) contexts.

Thus, performance- or enactment-centered folklorists look at items primarily in terms of (1) their “deep structure,” that is, the *idea* of the genre from which the item is to be understood through interpretation; (2) their uses by individuals and groups within the community as a way of establishing status (as, say, a performer of

note, a wise man, or whatever) or of creating some sense of groupness, by establishing some sense of sharing of interests, values, a universe of discourse (including local references and stereotypical renderings of outsiders); and (3) the structure of context, in which elements of time, place, and occasion of enactment are brought to bear in the analysis of significant actions and events.

Through this last method (derived ultimately from the Malinowskian "situation of context") it has become known that certain times and places are endowed with significance by a community. But this has seldom been actually demonstrated in the folklore literature. To be sure, there is no little anecdotal commentary on, say, the importance of *palaver houses* for men in Africa, native American, and Melanesian and Polynesian groups. But very few actual studies of the goings on at special times in these places are to be discovered. Similarly, we know that the coffeehouse, the rum shop, the saloon, and the pub have a similar importance in the social and cultural ecology of European and Euro-American communities; but again we have few actual ethnographies of such play-behavior or ceremonies therein. Thus, we know very little about the situation of creativity and community comment in such public places of gathering, to say nothing of the more private occasions in which men and women, old and young, are brought together in any symbolic landscape to interact, play, perform, ceremonialize, and make fun. Is this because folklorists have not taken the time to sit and observe in such places long enough to be able to write the rules for these occasions?

Whatever the answer, the greatest virtue of Falassi's work is that we have here a carefully observed and documented study of the cultural ecology of a series of events through representative texts and through an elaborate but commonsensical description of the symbology of place, the intensification and stylization of everyday behaviors as the structures of family and community are put into expressive activities.

The *veglia* described here is an expressive organization of community diversity, contrasts, and contentions. It is an occasion for talk, indeed for the entire range of social actions; but as so often happens when so many familiars are brought together, the *veglia* constantly threatens to break into performance. Literally a *vigil* or *wake* held in the kitchen of a peasant house, what is presented here is a series of rule-regulated types of fun making which presents the

very kind of material and the discussion of the organization of expressive behavior that the performance-centered folklorist has cried out for but not often carried out. Falassi demonstrates that, by attending to such patterned details, we can not only understand but also vicariously enter into the folklife of this set of peasant communities. In focused engagements like this, the people of a community bring out their most significant expressive treasures, ones which overtly state and characterize both the ideals and the practices of the community. Moreover, with folkloric enactments, the materials are so heavily redundant and so reflexive and self-analyzed that in the deepest sense the lore bespeaks the group. There is never any question about the representative character of such lore as reported; for every example picked as characteristic of the repertoire ten others must be left out not only for lack of space but also because they repeat the point, the basic organization, and the themes of the items given. To be sure, the folklorist chooses the fullest or most easily grasped items to make a point; but this material is, though often of rare beauty, nevertheless of such a conventional nature that its representative character cannot be questioned.

So we are in Professor Falassi's debt for bringing to bear hard-core ethnographic observation of an important expressive event and using it as a means of understanding a fascinating system of life. He set a model for all of us to follow in the fullness and integrity of this pursuit.

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