

**“Whistlin’ Towards the Devil’s House”:  
Poetic Transformations and Natural Metaphysics in an  
Appalachian Folktale Performance**

[\*eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)<sup>1</sup>]

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Great writers spend their working lives inclining toward posterity. When they set seal upon their final opus, all that remains is for the editing, publishing, and critical industries to add up their literary artifacts into an accounting of an artistic legacy. Great storytellers, on the other hand, breathe their art into the wind that blows where it lists. Their legacies are scattered in the hollows of community memories, in whatever may have been written or spoken about them, and in any formal or informal recordings that remain behind of their voices or their images. Electronic culture may have compounded storytellers’ legacies by multiplying the media products available for study. But major translation problems remain as stubborn as ever: how to move from the ephemeral delights of a storytelling performance into abiding illuminations of the storyteller’s art?

The late Ray Hicks (1922-2003) of Beech Mountain, North Carolina, is certainly more fortunate in his posterity than most traditional tellers. He was still a child in the 1920s and 1930s when folklore collectors Robert Gordon, Mellinger Henry, Maurice Matteson, Richard Chase, and Frank and Anne Warner began visiting Beech Mountain to record his family’s tales and songs. In 1962, at age 40, he made his own first recording of four Jack tales on a Folk Legacy LP, still in print. In 1973 he began a 27-year run as the iconic heart of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee (all recorded and deposited in the Library of Congress). 1976 brought the Appalshop documentary “Fixin’ to Tell About Jack.” Following his receipt

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<sup>1</sup> To listen to the four performances described in this article, visit the eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

of the NEA National Heritage Fellowship in 1983, a profile by Gwen Kincaid appeared in *New Yorker* magazine. PBS filmed him for their series *The Story of English*. There was a 1989 June Appal recording of his personal stories, “Jack Alive.” Robert Isbell published two editions of his biography of Ray and other family members—*The Last Chivaree* (1996) was later re-titled (2001) after its central figure, *Ray Hicks: Master Storyteller of the Blue Ridge*. In 2000 Lyn Salsi published three of Hicks’ Jack tales as a children’s picture book with accompanying CD (Hicks 2000); and there have been innumerable other theses and dissertations (Gutierrez 1975, Sobol 1987, McDermitt 1986, Oxford 1987, Pavasic 2005), popular books (Petro 2001, Smith 1988), articles, newspaper and magazine features, and field recordings in university and private archives documenting Ray’s torrents of talk and his impact as an artist and a man.

In short, over the course of his four-score years Ray Hicks made his way onto the fringe of that peculiar American terrain: folk celebrity. There is widespread consensus among those acquainted with traditional and contemporary storytelling that Ray was a master of the art. There is ample documentation of that art, and plentiful attempts to convey the facts and the legendary atmosphere of his life, in which much of his personal magnetism lay. I have written several previous essays on him: on a particular telling of AT513, “The Dry Land Ship” (1994), on his iconic relationship with the National Storytelling Festival (1999:104-16), and on his transformation of a hospital into a setting for some particularly memorable performances (2002). Yet there has been too little written that conveys the poetical inner workings of his tellings, their thematic urgencies, and their striking liberties within the traditional molds. Beyond the aura of celebrity, these are the elements that made up his actual artistry, and that made his storytelling sessions so spontaneous, risky, and exhilarating until nearly the end of his life.

In writing about these matters here, I will be deliberately avoiding the “last-of-a-breed” myth-making mood that suffuses much of the popular literature on Ray, and the literature on the storytelling movement generally. If storytelling is ever to take its place as an art among other contemporary arts, with a sense of its traditional roots and thriving branches, it will need to relinquish this dependence on nostalgia and the lure of the irrecoverable past as its sole source of appeal. Ray Hicks certainly represented a link to a bygone time and place; but to leave him at that is to diminish his stature. He was also an artist of rare and compulsive gifts, working in a medium that can bear keen, dry-eyed appreciation.

The subject of this study is a performance of “Wicked John and the Devil,” one of the teller’s best-known and most emblematic tales. It was recorded at his home on Beech Mountain, North Carolina, on June 6, 1985.

This was the same occasion and audience for which he told “Hardy-Hardass,” his version of AT513, which was transcribed and discussed in *Jack in Two Worlds* (Sobol 1994). “Wicked John” is a version of AT330, “The Smith Outwits the Devil.” This is a tale common all over Europe<sup>2</sup> and has been found in the New World in white, Hispanic, and African-American traditions.<sup>3</sup>

The smith is a type of the master craftsman. He works with elemental powers: fire, metals forged from earth, air for the bellows, and water for cooling. From these elements he draws his own powers. Inasmuch as he harnesses those elemental powers for human benefit, he is a Promethean figure, related to the many parallel characters in folklore who steal fire from the gods. He is also a direct descendant of Lugh, the divine smith of Celtic mythology, as well as of Gaibhde, who in some versions is Lugh’s own father, and who in later oral traditions becomes the clever smith the Goban Saor, a hero of his own popular cycle of trickster legends.

According to Thompson, in full versions of the 330 type the smith receives his powers from the Devil through sale of his soul; he is then granted magic wishes or objects by a divine emissary as well, most commonly St. Peter, and these allow him to deceive and to overcome the Devil when he comes to collect. Yet this victory eventually leaves him homeless after death, as neither heaven nor hell will now receive him. In most versions he ends up wandering the world in limbo, and the story’s ending often turns this into an explanatory device for some mysterious earthly phenomenon such as the Will-o’-the-wisp, the Jack-o’-lantern, or, in Hicks’ version, the Brown Mountain Lights. As Hicks had the Devil instructing Wicked John: “You take this fire. . . . You go out and start a Hell o’ your own!”

Ray Hicks was best known of course for his Jack tales, and Jack too is related to Wicked John, much as the Goban Saor, the Irish “Jack of all trades,” was related to his mythic elders Gaibhde and Lugh (O’Sullivan 1974:17-22). Jack is an everyman hero who often plays the trickster role, overcoming antagonists of all description: giants, witches, kings, beasts, and robbers. John is the etymological root of the name Jack—significantly, in one of Chase’s original sources the character of Wicked John was actually called Jack as well, a detail that we will revisit—but while the name and the

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<sup>2</sup> See Briggs 1970:493, Dasent 1904:105, Grimm and Grimm 1944:367, MacManus 1963:10, and Sampson 1984:49.

<sup>3</sup> See Bierhorst 2002:92, Chase 1948:29-38 and 1956:21-31, Harris 1921:160-65, Hurston 1935, and Torrence 1991.

folktale character Jack are figures for the adventures of youth, the name and the character of John the blacksmith are figures for age and the struggles of age against decay and death. Thus John the old blacksmith potentially plays a role even more fraught with metaphysical gravity than Jack the young fortune-seeker. John's principal antagonist, on the face of it, is the Devil himself, "the very own Devil," as John's wife puts it to him in Hicks' version. Yet Hicks' Wicked John has other forces to contend against, forces that do not explicitly figure in other versions of the story, and that give Hicks' telling particular complexity, poignancy, and even a taste of tragic grandeur.

This particular performance of "Wicked John and the Devil" took just under 25 minutes. The transcription given in the appendix to this article is laid out according to the ethnopoetic methods developed by Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Elizabeth Fine, and others into 536 lines of free verse, with a few additional lines of audience interaction at the very beginning and the end. Ethnopoetic transcriptions are intended as modes of translation between folk narrative in its living contexts and the acts of making and reading printed texts. Like any translation, an ethnopoetic transcript is bound to be incomplete, limited by a series of compromises—between the demands of the ear and the eye, between the existential wholeness of performance and the permanence and cultural authority of print. For the reader's sake, I have attempted to incorporate only a few of the dynamic or intonational markers and none of the kinesic codes that Fine devises for her performance-centered texts. Italics are used to represent emphases of volume, pitch, or both. There is so little audience laughter on the tape of this performance (a noteworthy detail in itself) that it is insignificant as a dynamic cue; so instead of the bracketed exclamation points that represent the element of laughter in my transcription of Hick's "Hardy Hardass" (McCarthy 1994:10-26), I have inserted the bracketed letter [H], to signal moments where Hicks' voice descends to a particular emotional register that I simply call Heart. This element, rather than the comedic, was the tonic note of this telling.

Line and stanza breaks are based on a close but non-technical rendering of vocal pauses and breath units. This is an "acoustic" transcript—for better or worse, no mechanical or digital measuring instruments were used to make this text beyond the cassette player and the ear. Roughly one-half to one second vocal rests and consequent line breaks often but not inevitably correspond with syntactic units below the level of the sentence (though "the sentence" is an admittedly loose construct in oral discourse), such as subject-verb clauses or various types of dependent or independent clauses. Stanzaic rests of a second or longer sometimes correspond with larger semantic and discourse units; but depending on the pacing of the

scene and the telling, these longer rests can also break the rhythmic flow into short incantory phrases, down to pairs of or even single words. This is not the place to fully explore the issue of whether or not ethnopoetic texts can legitimately be considered as scores for re-performance; simply stated, this one is not intended as such. Yet the rigorous and repeated listenings required to produce even basic texts of this kind can yield all kinds of insights into the verbal surfaces and emotional depths of long-past performance events. For that, as for the existence of these fragile and contingent magnetic documents, I am purely thankful.

To appreciate Hicks' personal artistic transformation of "Wicked John," we need to examine his sources. Hicks grew up in one of the least diluted sanctuaries of oral tradition in the United States; yet he grew to maturity and assumed his place in the tradition during a time of intrusive change—changes that were both heralded and fostered by the arrival and interventions of the folklore collectors. Hicks credited his grandfather, John Benjamin Hicks (known as Ben), with his earliest versions of most of his tales. Other versions and variants he would have heard from relatives such as his uncle Roby Hicks or Roby's son Stanley, his brother-in-law Frank Proffitt Sr., or distant cousins Monroe and Miles Ward and Monroe's son Marshall. There was another influential figure in Hicks' storytelling experience, however, one who played a fascinatingly complex part as collector, scribe, and cross-fertilizing purveyor of folktale repertoires. That was the charismatic and controversial author of *The Jack Tales* (1943), *Grandfather Tales* (1948), and *American Folk Tales and Songs* (1956)—Richard Chase himself. Since debate over Chase's role in redacting and codifying Appalachian *märchen* in the popular imagination has only seemed to increase in recent decades, it would be well to take another look here at the relations between Hicks' "Wicked John" and that of Chase.

Chase was a prototypical folk revivalist. His personal journey in the 1920s and '30s from middle-class New England and Alabama roots to his later career as professional popularizer of Appalachian folk music, dance, and storytelling has been examined critically in several works, beginning with David Whisnant (1983) and followed by Charles L. Perdue (1987, 2001) and Carl Lindahl (1994, 2001). Chase began his work with Appalachian revivalism at Pine Mountain Settlement School in Kentucky in 1924, and worked in the '30s under the auspices of several New Deal cultural programs, including teaching folksong to schoolteachers through the Office of Emergency Relief in Education. Through that job in 1935 he met a young fifth-grade teacher from Boone, North Carolina, named Marshall Ward, who introduced him to the Beech Mountain storytelling tradition. In

1940, after Chase had already spent several years collecting from the Wards and their neighbors, Marshall Ward's father R. Monroe Ward introduced him to another folklore enthusiast from Wise County, Virginia, James Taylor Adams, who had been in correspondence with Ward about traditional mountain culture. In 1941-42, Chase was able to get support from the Federal Writers Project of Virginia to spend time collecting with Adams in Wise County (Perdue 2001:113). These two areas, separated by 100 miles or so of rough terrain, became the mother-lodes both of Chase's literary work and of his repertoire as a professional performer.

Perdue prints archival tale texts from Chase's Virginia collecting partner, Adams, and compares them with Chase's published and unpublished versions. He also discusses Chase's often cavalier way with sources. But Perdue makes quite clear, albeit from the problematizing perspective of traditional folkloristics, that Chase's method of creating his published texts was that of a storytelling practitioner—a writer-performer who straddled the oral and literary worlds, and who for better or worse was unabashed about actively reshaping traditions as he recorded them. Perdue quotes Chase to that effect in a letter to the director of the Virginia Writers Project (1987:113):

About this rich and full quality that should go into any editing of this oral stuff—The NC “Jack and the Giants” was quite a skinny tale at the first recording. After hearing Mr. Ward tell it again when we had a gang of kids around us, it filled out considerable. But after hearing Ben Hicks, Miles Ward, and [blank] Hicks tell it, it became interesting, and after I had *told* [emphasis in original] it a few times it really came to life. Having gone through this telling-listening process so much with the NC tradition now I can do it as a [blank] but I do need a number of variants.

This was in 1941—Ray Hicks would have been 19 years old, and already an experienced teller. He often claimed to have started immediately retelling to playmates, siblings, and anyone else who would listen, the stories he heard as a child in his grandfather Benjamin's lap. The bracketed blanks in the passage above indicate lacunae or legibility problems in the original manuscript. But it is intriguing to remind ourselves that while the “[blank] Hicks” who told a variant of “Jack and the Giants” here might have been any number of Hicks-Ward-Harmon relatives (those credited in the notes to *The Jack Tales* included Monroe Ward, Martha Ward Presnell, Ben Hicks, and Roby Hicks), it might just as well have been Ray.

It is also clear from this passage and from other evidence as well (Perdue 1987, 2001) that Hicks would have had plenty of opportunity to listen to Chase. Chase was a figure on Beech Mountain for much of Hicks'

life. Chase first visited with Marshall Ward in 1935, when Hicks was 13, and he visited and even lived there off and on until the '60s. His books came out at regular intervals between 1943 and 1956; but, just as significantly, Chase was making his living as a professional storyteller in and around western North Carolina for that entire period. There were very few storytellers working regularly then in schools, libraries, folk festivals, and other public venues—the same circuit that later formed the infrastructure of the Jonesborough-based revival of the '70s and '80s. As Hicks' star was rising in that later firmament, Chase's was declining (Sobol 1999). But as Hicks made his own very gradual and ambivalent transition into a public and professional role, Chase would have stood for him as an important, highly visible, positive and negative role model.

Chase has been much criticized by contemporary folklorists like Lindahl, Perdue, and Whisnant for unscrupulously adapting tales, conflating versions, and adding details and incidents out of his own experience to create not a folkloristically accurate representation of a local repertoire, but a transformation of tradition into something new—a “Richard Chase repertoire.” This, however, had been standard practice for literary purveyors of folkloric material at least from Chaucer and Boccaccio onward—Chase's deftly dissimulating frame-narrative to *Grandfather Tales* is modeled self-consciously on these earlier works. One pitfall for Chase seems to have been that his later career coincided with the ascendance of modern anthropological standards of representation and informant ethics to vie with the older library-based aesthetics of literary folklorists. Another was surely the manner of high-handed personal aggrandizement with which he appropriated the works of his sources.

Chase has generally been cast as the heavy in recent retellings of the clash-of-cultures narrative; yet there is much in his early proselytizing and later posturing that I would view in the light of another narrative: that of the bright talent beset with tragic flaws. It was Chase's very brilliance as a crafter of popular frames and palatable if synthetic oral/literary pastiche versions that made them compelling to educated mountaineers and outsiders alike. Ellis (1994:101) and Lindahl (2001:74, 94n) have noted the effect of Chase's retellings on one teller from within the local tradition, Maud Long, for whom they seemed to supplant key details of her own mother's renderings. It is interesting to note, however, that the process of appropriating, conflating, and adding personal detail to create distinctive artistic signatures did not simply flow in one direction. Members of the Folk had their artistic licenses, too, and were as eager to appropriate Chase's art as he was to appropriate theirs.

In conversations with Ray Hicks over many years I often heard him refer to the original corpus of Jack tales that he heard from his grandfather Benjamin as “the twelve.” There was a theophanic ring to it that struck me as characteristic. Unfortunately, I never did ask him to inventory exactly which stories stood in that number. But even a glance at *The Jack Tales*’ table of contents shows more than that: 18 Jack tales, to be exact. And Hicks’ active repertoire as enacted in his 27 years on the Jonesborough stage also grew well beyond the original set. After describing the Harmon-Hicks-Ward family and their tale-telling repertoires, Chase’s introduction to *The Jack Tales* states (1943:x):

[I]n Wise County, Virginia we have found three tales unknown to the Wards: “Jack and the Bull,” through Mr. James Taylor Adams of Big Laurel, and recorded from Mrs. Polly Johnson of Wise; “Jack and King Marock,” recorded from Mrs. Nancy Shores, of Pound; and “Soldier Jack,” recorded from Mr. Gaines Kilgore, of Pound. And, very recently, a Jack tale was found in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Chase’s statement supports some intriguing insights into Hicks’ repertoire, some speculative, some confirmed. One clear deduction is that these three tales, unknown on Beech Mountain at the time of Chase’s collecting, were introduced into that local tradition by Chase and/or Adams. In fact Hicks eventually incorporated all three. I have heard him tell “Jack and King Marock,” the longest and fullest wonder tale in Chase’s book, at the National Festival. “Jack and the Bull” he told for me at home during his last illness, and he confirmed then that he learned both that tale and “King Marock” “from the book.” “Soldier Jack” became one of Hicks’ favorite tales to tell, so closely identified with him that his version became the centerpiece of the 1976 Appalshop documentary. Like “Wicked John,” to which it is closely related, “Soldier Jack” incorporates and dramatizes much of Hicks’ personal philosophy: his ideas about life and death, good and evil, nature and the human soul. These themes were present in Chase’s versions in glib, skeletal images. Hicks meditated his way inside the tales, clothed those images with flesh, and breathed them full of passionate interior life.

Finally, Chase’s statement gives us an inkling about the wandering path of “Wicked John.” For the Jack tale “very recently . . . found in Charlottesville, Virginia,” was almost certainly this one. None of the stories in the notes to *The Jack Tales* are credited to a Charlottesville informant; but in *Grandfather Tales* “Wicked John” is primarily attributed to a Mrs. Jennings L. Yowell of Charlottesville, with the further remark that “Mrs. Yowell called him ‘Wicked Jack’.” No Beech Mountain source for the tale is



given—the only other credited informant is Mr. Peck Daniel of Bristol, Virginia. The implication here, though difficult to confirm at this point since virtually all contemporary witnesses are gone, is that this tale, too, came into Hicks' repertoire via Chase—either “from the book,” as with the three above, or from hearing Chase perform it.<sup>4</sup>

These inferences and assertions are beset with many of the usual drawbacks of the historical-geographic method. They are based on limited or hearsay testimony, circumstantial evidence, and informed surmise, and would hardly be conclusive in a court of law. We cannot say with certainty that there were no versions of AT330 in circulation around Beech Creek before Chase and Adams appeared on the scene. Even if there had been, however, internal comparisons between Chase's and Hicks' versions support the argument for Chase's influence. The most interesting part of Hicks' performance is the elaborate introductory fantasy, discussed below, for which there is no parallel in Chase. But once Hicks actually launches into the body of the narrative itself, the motifs line up with Chase's version as faithfully as they do for one of his grandfather's “twelve.”

Does this indicate that Hicks was following Chase, or vice versa? A crucial clue lies in the main character's name. We have Chase's word that he made the change from Jack to “Wicked John.” This is of a piece both with Chase's method and his aesthetics. He was never averse to altering, collating, and conflating his Appalachian source versions to fit with his own notions of a higher authenticity, to which he assumed a privileged access through his study of the “original” European antecedents. But he was also prone to altering elements to fit into the aesthetic frameworks of his books. And Jack the crusty old blacksmith was a poor match for the character of Jack that Chase was creating in his first book, *The Jack Tales*. The title of that work is a flag of its ambition: to create a popular American folktale cycle, with a hero whose individualistic everyman persona remains consistent from tale to tale. Chase was the most devout Unitarian among Jack tale writers: his view or, rather, his manifest desire that the hero of his book should be experienced as a single figure through all of his episodic adventures predetermined many of his authorial choices. One of those choices was to take the Jack tale “recently discovered in Charlottesville,

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<sup>4</sup> A parallel from a very different tradition is the famous example of Avdo Medjedović, Parry and Lord's star *guslar*, who listened to an inferior version of a previously unknown epic song and instantly created his own far fuller and more authoritative version. Medjedović's most significant song, “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho,” was apparently learned and expanded upon from a short chapbook version read to him by a friend (Lord 2000:78, 223-34).

Virginia” and to reserve it for his next book, *Grandfather Tales*, where it would not clash with his carefully constructed image of Jack as a *puer aeternus*. Chase was so fond of “Wicked John,” in fact, that he printed it twice, and in his introduction to the tale in *American Folk Tales and Songs*, where it is the first tale in the volume, he is as explicit as he can be about his motives (1956:21):

As printed here it is based on the way I heard it from Mrs. Jennings L. Yowell of Charlottesville, Virginia. Her name for the blacksmith was “Wicked Jack.” I changed it to “John” to avoid confusion with the boy Jack of *The Jack Tales*.

Could Hicks or other Beech Mountain traditional tellers have been circulating versions of “Wicked John and the Devil,” using that title, that name of the central figure, and that precise sequence of plot motifs, before Chase and without Chase encountering it during his collecting period? It is possible, of course. But I would suggest an alternate and perhaps more interesting story: that Chase’s version became the basis of “Wicked John’s” entry into the Beech Mountain repertoire. Chase’s redaction of Mrs. Yowell’s “Wicked Jack” would thus have been the version that Hicks received from Chase, by oral or written transmission or both—just as any good storyteller might borrow from another who comes to share his parlor and his family table—and that Hicks then reframed to make entirely and triumphantly his own.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This two-way transmission process, though it breaches a certain cherished ideal of folk inviolability, is in fact more normal than its absence. The natural way for a folktale collector to get a session started is to “tell one.” As Adams wrote in an unpublished guide for fieldworkers (Perdue 1987:108):

I have found that the best way to get the ordinary tale-teller started off is to talk about other things at first, then gradually drift around to old times and old tales. I usually tell one myself, choosing one of the shorter ones like “The Big Toe,” or “Fat and Lean,” anything which I think might stir the memory of my prospective informant.

In a context in which the suspicion of cultural expropriation and economic exploitation has not already been introduced, the ordinary reaction of a lover of story is to listen and respond, and to mentally file away the offered stories for later use—just as the collector will do with the informant’s tales. This mutuality is the would-be norm. It is precisely the collector-informant role-play that both creates the semblance of this natural human dynamic and then subverts it by overlaying a disciplinary shadow-history of expropriation, exploitation, and class-conflict or patronization. Ellis (1994) reveals that Maud Long, though she remembered learning only 11 tales from her mother Jane Gentry, eventually boasted that she could tell every story in either *The Jack Tales* or *Grandfather Tales*. For this Ellis pronounces Long “one of the first—and most successful—of the

The 25 minutes transcribed here are a cutting from a long afternoon and evening of storytelling and conversation in the Hicks' front room, with an audience consisting of my friend Kathleen Zundell (a storyteller from Los Angeles), one Beech Mountain neighbor (a man in his fifties), Ray's son Ted, and myself. Ray's wife Rosa was in the kitchen preparing food. Thus the audience was a concentrated mix of insiders and relative outsiders to Hicks' storytelling repertoire and milieu. To bring the mix into one accord, the first six minutes and ten seconds of the performance captured on tape is a remarkable introductory oral essay, a rhetorical *tour de force*, which challenges not only the commonplace assumptions about the character of Wicked John, but also folklorists' canonic understandings of folk narrative genre and style—as based on frequently simplified and decontextualized literary renderings.

He begins, immediately after the insertion of the cassette in the recorder and the pressing of the record buttons, with a sweeping claim: “They just told it like it was: / Any man can be Wicked John.” The first line is perhaps a response to a question about how Hicks originally heard the tale. His answer boldly appropriates his sources' voices (“They just told it like it was . . .”) into his own reading of the character's metonymic nature. As we will see, this is not a literal report—it is unlikely that any source understood the character remotely the way Ray did. Certainly neither Mrs. Yowell nor Chase would recognize the brief that follows. The statement is a fictive device. Like the famous opening lines of *Moby Dick* or *Finnegan's Wake*, it is a way of immediately abducting the listeners into the mythic dimension where the hero and the story will reside. The device is not limited to his characterization of John—Jack inhabits this realm for Hicks as well. Barbara McDermitt recorded his expansion on the theme in 1983 (9):

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revivalists” (105). While stated in an ostensibly complimentary tone, and defensible in the context of *Jack in Two Worlds*'s thematics, Ellis's very need to make the distinction in the case of Long's mainly private storytelling displays vestiges of the old folkloristic romance that would push the standard of purity ever further up the holler and into the past. If Maud Long, whose mother Jane Gentry was Cecil Sharp's greatest ballad source and the first recorded Hicks-Harmon tradition tale-teller, should be counted as “the first and most successful of the revivalists,” then surely Ray Hicks must be the next—and he was far more successful both in terms of recognition and of stubborn adherence to his own aesthetic. But the extended logic of dichotomization here finally reaches towards the absurd. It might be wiser to simply acknowledge the multiple shadings of cross-cultural interaction between mountain folk and folklorists, amateur collectors, romantic regionalists, and revivalists, extending over many decades, and to regard with dispassion—even some compassion—most sentient beings' incorrigible habit of influencing one another.

That's the way it was when I growed up . . . when you git like I tell it, I'm Jack. Everybody can be Jack. Jack ain't dead, he's a-livin'. Jack can be anybody. . . . Like I tell 'em sometimes, I'm Jack. I've been Jack. I mean in different ways. Now I ain't everything Jack's done in the tales, but still I've been Jack in lots of ways. It takes Jack to live.

Californian Kathleen proceeds to prod the teller on a point of gender inclusiveness: "Any person?" she asks.

Hicks easily agrees, "any person, yeah." Overriding my own attempt at a conversational turn, he continues, "any man, or a woman, can be Wicked John." He goes on to draw the outlines of the character: he is poor, hard-working, long-suffering, and inflamed with "the heart desire, in there, to help poor people." He is a man, in short, very much like Hicks himself. "And that," he continues, "makes 'em . . . cuss—to try and stand the job."

Hicks has now introduced his thematic core: the conflict between good and evil that rages, not between the two-dimensional figures of typical folktale antagonists, but within the complex personality of the hero. Hicks proceeds to directly challenge the traditional characterization, as found in Chase and others' versions:

And they called him a mean man.  
 But that's about all the way it was to tell the tale.  
 A man like 'at was the best people that was  
     to help little young'uns out—  
     now a lot o' the people get that told wrong.

So Hicks is in critical dialogue here not just with those of us in the room, but with all those who have told the tale before him, and who have adapted simplifying strategies in order to fit the hero to a generic pattern. Chase's Wicked John is a comic buffoon of the bad-man type. Mrs. Yowell, whose version Chase follows more closely in *American Folk Tales and Songs*, adds the further derisive note that he is a mean drunk. The fact that he feeds a hungry beggar once is portrayed as a mere plot function, at best a momentary and accidental lapse of his general uninflected badness.

Folklorists, literary scholars, psychologists, and writers on oral-formulaic theory have been complicit in this commonplace reduction as well. Authors from such diverse backgrounds as Max Lüthi (1976), Marie-Louise von Franz (1996), and Walter Ong (1982) have fallen into line; and Elliott Oring sums up conventional folkloristic and formulaic-theoretical wisdom concerning character in oral narrative thus (1986:127-28):

Folktales place little emphasis on character development. . . . No attention is paid to internal conflict or complex motivation. Folktale figures are two-dimensional characters rather than three-dimensional personalities. The wolf is large, voracious and wily. The kids are small, innocent and gullible. These traits are givens. The folktale does not concern itself with explaining the wolf's character in psychological or philosophical terms.

Hicks' John is something else again: he is a man whose compassion for human suffering leads him to take on the devil's own work—toiling at the fiery furnace—and the devil's own language—curse words, or “cuss” words. “Cuss words” for mountain folk, as in other cultures, are taboo utterances that summon forbidden powers—either the names of the divine and the diabolic (the name of the Lord or the Devil taken “in vain” or in a non-sacred setting), or of forbidden functions of the earthly life, the life of the body. This is where Hicks' own natural metaphysics announces itself and begins to weave into the fabric of the story.

A recurrent theme of his discourses over the 20 years I knew him was the many errors of understanding in the conventional religious denominations that surrounded him. “A lot of the people get that told wrong” was a statement I heard him make as often in reference to a fine point of biblical exegesis as to folktale interpretation. Hicks' principal book was in fact not *The Jack Tales* but the King James Bible; yet he interpreted it in some surprisingly heterodox ways, through a prism deeply colored by direct reading in what he called “the Book o' Life”—nature in all its numinous patterns. *Fixin' to Tell About Jack* (Appalshop 1976) captures him in the mid-seventies expounding the analogies between the galax plant and the human soul: the vine's root stock covers large areas of earth and sends up similarly patterned leaves each new growing season. When the leaves are picked, the roots remain below the ground to rise again—so the leaves he picks are in fact the same stuff as his ancestors picked and his descendants will pick. And so with the human soul: our physical forms grow from the root stock of spirit that remains in the ground of the unseen from generation to generation. Hicks arrived at the idea of reincarnation through that reading of the vegetative cycle, and fully expected to return in some form after his physical body had been digested by the earth. When I asked him once about heaven, he simply replied as any earth-religionist might: “Heaven is the Planet.”

Thus Hicks' John, like his Jack, is infused with his brand of natural metaphysics, and the tale is interwoven with the ongoing theological debate between the conventional Protestant and radical/natural mythic systems and root narratives. Lines 1-50 of the introductory section present the basic

imagining of a kind-hearted man who adopts the tools, the powers, and the language of the negative realms in order to serve the hungry and the needy. This is John *in imitatio Christi*. His divine spark is descended into a fallen world, like his evangelist namesake's Light that shone in darkness and the darkness knew it not. He could equally exemplify the bodhisattva's vow never to attain nirvana while suffering remains in the world. Hicks' natural metaphysics is strongly inflected by the earth-centered worldviews of the Native Americans who occupied the land when his ancestors arrived, and who intermarried with them (Hicks' great-grandmother Rebecca was apparently full-blood Cherokee) and taught them both survival skills and attitudes that were still articulated and embodied by Hicks. The astonishment of Hicks' telling is that while these biblical and world-scriptural parallels are never made explicit, it is evident that the tone of philosophical and psychological urgency and immanence is fully and eloquently present. Not only does it thoroughly transform our apprehension of the character John, it also leads us to question and to nuance some key tenets of orthodox folk narrative theory.<sup>6</sup>

At line 51 Hicks interrupts himself. "*And I been with him!*" he exclaims, and the rhetoric and energy of the performance suddenly shift. For the next 74 lines he enters into a kind of associative catalogue of personal encounters with Wicked John in his various incarnations through the days of Hicks' youth.

*And I been with him!*

The same as he was,  
down here on the river.

And he had one eye put out,  
whur a piece o' steel, hot steel flew in it.

And he would *swear!*  
down on the river, I been in the shop  
of Wicked John.

*Been there!* not just a-hearin' it.

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<sup>6</sup> Another example of a traditional teller whose philosophical and cosmological principles are inextricably bound to his folktale repertoire is recounted by the Hungarian folklorist Sandor Erdesz in "The World Conception of Lajos Ami, Storyteller," originally published in 1961, available in Dundes 1984:315-35.

One of Hicks' roles as a storyteller was to bear stubborn witness to the Appalachian lifeways in which he had been raised. His was a lean and perilous existence, but it also bred varieties of resourcefulness, kindness, and everyday heroism that are fast fading from the cultural memory. As long as he was alive, Hicks obsessively reworked those first-hand accounts of vanished occupations, customs, and people into the frameworks of his traditional tales. So he goes on with a short history of blacksmithing in the Watauga district, not in the detached mode of a literary account, but in the passionate voice of a man rescuing his own life from the forces of oblivion. We hear about "the first Wicked John," who had a shop where he shod horses for farm work and logging, and also hammered out heel-irons for people who otherwise could not have kept body and soles together—cussing like fire all the while out of pure harsh necessity: "but if he—but if they wouldn't o' cussed it wouldn't o' holped me." The Lord may keep the feet of his saints, according to the Psalms, but the black-tongued smith kept the feet of men and horses. And reciprocally, men like Hicks would climb the high ridges to cut old-growth maples and roll them down the mountain to the river bottoms (the practice known as "ball-hootin") to make charcoal for the blacksmith's forge. All this is woven around the rhythmic refrains of "*Been there! Seed Wicked John! I've seed it! I seed—*"

Inserting himself like this into the tale of Wicked John as a kind of Ishmael to John's Ahab is another fictive device that, according to the classifications of folk narrative genres, we are not supposed to encounter. But it is fully characteristic of Hicks' art. It melds this performance with other generic frames, such as tall tale and legend; yet it undercuts our received understandings of each.<sup>7</sup> Tall tales generally begin in naturalistic settings and push by artfully logical steps towards the comically absurd. The legend, according to Oring, "is set in historical time, in the world as we know it today. It often makes reference to real people and places" (1986:125). Though many scholars have asserted that legends by definition are believed and told as factually true, Oring qualifies this explanation, saying rather that "the narration of a legend is, in a sense, the negotiation of the truth of these episodes . . . at the core of the legend is an evaluation of its truth status" (125). "A folktale," on the other hand, "is a narrative which is related and received as a fiction or a fantasy" (127).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Hicks would begin his performance of the standard miraculous hunt tale, "it's like the time me and Jack went hunting . . ." (Sobol 1992:98)

<sup>8</sup> Oring is passing on the disciplinary classification of prose oral narrative into genres of myth, legend, and folktale enshrined by Bascom in 1965 but inherited

So the critical question is: what are we to make of Hicks' claims in "Wicked John" when he says (ll. 60-66):

And—

like, if you believe me now,  
I'm a-tellin' the truth, I've been there,  
Seed Wicked John

A-hammering steel,  
th' ole way,  
and a-cussin'.

Is Hicks having us on, as a tall-tale teller would? Is he expressing a fundamental belief in the factuality of John's miraculous encounters with St. Peter and three emissaries from Hell, as in a conventional legend? Is he confused about his tale's proper genre status, or has he simply been carried away by emotion into a kind of hallucinatory fugue state?

Of course, Hicks is no longer available to be pestered with these kinds of questions. But, based on 20 years of listening to him at home and on various public stages, I would suggest that he had a much larger repertoire of imaginative devices than storytelling scholarship has usually admitted. He was not in fact asserting the literal truth of John's encounters; but by projecting himself inside the narrative frame of the folktale and declaring witness, he was making certain we listeners knew how deadly serious he was about their symbolic and metaphoric truth. Hicks' re-visioning of "Wicked John and the Devil" suggests that folk narrative genres, though a disciplinary milestone and an important tool for the basic sorting of texts, are insufficient to encompass the mutability of tales in context, nor the creative impulses of a particularly talented teller.<sup>9</sup>

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essentially unchanged from the Grimms. Though logically appealing, historically imposing, and undeniably useful as a sorting device, this typology is also problematic in theory and limiting in practice in some of the same ways as the classification of human beings by race and social class.

<sup>9</sup> A pioneering attempt to nuance folk narrative genre concepts through direct ethnographic observation of the multivalent creative forces at work and play in live storytelling performances was Daniel J. Crowley's *I Could Talk Old Story Good: Creativity in Bahamian Folklore* (1966). Henry Glassie's levels of talk in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1995) show an original attempt to bypass genre in the analysis of traditional storytelling dynamics. Richard Bauman (1986) uses sociolinguistic methods to show similar nuances in contrasting performances by a single teller. Megan Biesele (1999) and Donald Braid (1999, 2002) each demonstrate the enormous potential differences in psychological, philosophical, and poetic depth in performances of the same



There was no laughter in this performance, so utterly unlike his Rabelaisian rediscovery of “Hardy Hardass” later that evening. Men like John had saved Hicks’ life, for no other reason but that they had the “heart desire, in there” to do it. These were foul-mouthed, soot-covered, strong-smelling mountain men, outcasts from the polite society of the church-house, and scorned by would-be genteel wives. It was no aberration for men like these to feed a hungry beggar—it was of a piece with their culture of hospitality and their fellow-feeling for the needy. Yet neither would they take their reward in the world to come. Being earthly men they wanted their wishes here and now, in the form of power over earthly things—the chair, the hammer, the fire bush. These objects were sacred in a purely practical way to the blacksmith, representing well-earned rest, human craft, and natural beauty. With the power transferred to him and to his magical things by the visitor from above, John is empowered to defeat the claims of the forces from below. The tragic note in Hicks’ version, a tone that rings in each of the long, breathy, swallowed sobs marked in the transcript by an [H], is that in doing what he must—all that he knows how to do—the smith becomes too bad, too full of curses, to enter Heaven, but also too full of Luciferian power to coexist with the rulers of Hell.

Hicks’ specific genius here is to take Chase’s hoary comic yarn and to find the metaphysical implications within its central character and his struggle with the world, to take them both seriously and personally, and to attempt to work them out within the traditional structure of his tale. His task of poetic transformation in this telling is to redeem his flawed hero John, and through John all those decent, earthy elders of his youth and his community. In place of the typical jocular tale, Hicks has given us a tragic elegy. Wicked John’s heaven, like Ray Hicks’, is finally the planet, where he endures like the wandering folktale itself as a mysterious, flickering light. In the end, the recurrent tragic note resolves to a final chord of acceptance. Down goes John, “a-whistlin’ towards the Devil’s house,” and up he comes again. The folktale melts away and runs off into the legendary subject of the Brown Mountain Lights. “I ain’t seed it but one time,” Hicks said of the Lights—

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well-known tales by different narrators within single cultural traditions. Kay Stone (1999) shows some of the creative complications introduced into even the simplest traditional genres by changing contexts and teller intentions. Harold Scheub (1998, 2002) makes significant strides in seeking genre structures of African oral narratives beneath the surface in order to uncover their motivating impulses of emotion and symbolic transference, which he calls “the poem in the story.” Perhaps Trudier Harris-Lopez (2003:100) best summarizes the status of genre theory in contemporary folkloristics when she calls genre a “continuous site of contestation.”

unlike Jack or Wicked John, whom he could see wherever in the world he wished to look.

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## Appendix

[\*eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

### “Wicked John and the Devil”

Told by Ray Hicks

At home on Beech Mountain, NC, June 6, 1985

Ray: They just told it like it was: (1)  
any man can be Wicked John.

Kathleen: Any person?  
R: Any person, yeah.

Joseph: You were tellin’ me that, uh,  
he would get to cussin’  
R [overlapping]: Yeah, I mean any man—  
J: —cause it was just so hot in that shop—

R: —any man, or a woman, can be Wicked John, if they get in this—  
if they get in hard enough work. (10)

And get *deposed* long enough.

And *punished*—

And then got the heart desire,  
in there,  
to help poor people  
And that makes em. . .

*cuss*,  
to try and stand the job.

And they called him a mean man.

But that’s about all the way it was to tell the tale. (20)

A man like ’at was the best people that was. . .  
to help little younguns out—

now a lot o the people get that told wrong.

You see now, Wicked John, he was a man that—  
like I said, when y' first come there talkin' with her—

of a way Mother divided our feed out— [referring to an earlier turn in his conversation with Kathleen]

Now a man like this  
tried to help—  
wherever parents as had little children—  
whur their father's wagon was broke down, (30)

And his horse was without horseshoe.

And he had no grab.

Well he'd toe 'em.  
And like, Wicked John now, he run gristmills in the mountains.

They some lost their lives—

up a-choppin' ice on the mill wheel tryin' to help two little boys out  
that come wi' a little turn a corn—

Cut hisself with the ax and died

Cause he know'd they was hungry.  
Well they'd *cuss*, (40)  
while they was a-choppin' that ice.

Cussin's what made 'em chop it,  
a man that wouldn't cuss wouldn't *do* that.

He'd quit!  
He'd give up and quit and let the children die!

That cussin' kept him built up.  
What made him cuss—  
had a good heart in him.

And the one that didn't have the feelin' would quit and  
*all* just starve to death.

And so, Wicked John, he uh— (50)

*And I been with him!*



The same as he was,  
     down here on the river.

And he had one eye put out,  
     whur a piece o' steel, hot steel flew in it.

And he would *swear!*  
     down on the river, I been in the shop  
     of Wicked John.

*Been there!* not just a-hearin' it,  
     And—

(60)

like, if you believe me now,  
     I'm a-tellin' the truth, I've been there.  
     Seed Wicked John

A-hammerin' steel,  
     th' ole way,  
     and a-cussin'.

But if he—but if they wouldn't o' cussed,  
     it wouldn't o' holped me.

And so Wicked John—

    he run a blacksmith shop.

(70)

And say,

that coulda been,

right along,

in the mountains here,

about

in nineteen hundert

coulda been the first 'n there

    that got started a-beatin'  
     some steel

And the first Wicked John then:

(80)

They had to roll logs—

now that down yander's a place they called the Coal Pit,  
where Wicked John

had a shop down yander,  
and I seed the shop, uh—later,  
And built me heel irons  
for my leather-heeled shoes.

Made heel-irons  
to put on there.

And built 'em for a— (90)  
a nickel or a dime apiece.

Heel-irons—  
when leather-heeled shoes, would, uh—

Wet—get wet, and the way they put them steel spikes on, they'd come off!  
Well you could put heel-irons on there and drive a center right full of carpet tacks,

And hit'd last!

And so he'd make the heel-iron,

fer ye,

and put 'em on fer ye, if you asked him. (100)  
I just—just git him to put mine on, in the shop.

And so, Wicked John, he, uh—

There at the Coal Pit they rolled sugar-tree logs and ball-hooted 'em off o' the mountain  
right over yander into the holler—

And got them logs afire,  
and then covered it up with dirt-sod,  
and dirt,  
and made charcoal *out o' wood*,  
was their first coal  
to heat steel here in the mountains, they had no way to get coal  
nowhere in here, they didn't know what coal was! (110)

They 's no transporta—they didn't know where no coal 's at in Kentucky—

Virginia—

And they made their charcoal outa coverin' that hard wood up,  
and it's hotter 'n coal!

atter it's smothered and burnt in there with that old—  
they some coals down there in the ground yit.

Ain't never rotted.

And so Wicked John—

He run this shop.

And some way or some how—

(120)

like, uh—

like it, it—

I've *seed* it.

I seed—

His wife couldn't understand [voice catch, emotion] poor old John.

She couldn't understand.

He had to work in that shop,  
and then to help people too, to get a little earnings to live on.

And worked hard, but—  
she didn't like him a-dirtyin' her sheets,  
or her bedclothes up.

(130)

She'd yap at him,

And he'd cuss.

He'd say,

[whispered] "*Oh my Gaw-wd.*"

He was in there, he couldn't keep clean, and he didn't have enough clothes to change.

And her a-yappin',

"John—

[miserable tone] you're gonna ruin ever'thing I've got."

An'— (140)  
directly they kept yapping.

An'—

finally,

she says, "John,"

said, "Some o' these days,

"the very own *Devil*

is gonna come to the shop and carry you off."

He says, "By God, let him come!"

And, [from defiant to pleading] "By God, honey, let him come."

"Let him come to the— (150)  
I'm just doin' the best I can,

"beatin' this steel,"

Says, "I don't know nothin' else to do."

And he says, "I thought

I was a-helpin' little younguns,

"And parents to raise their kids

in this here world we live in."

And so,

Hit went on.

And they would yap, (160)  
and he would swear.

And finally. . .

Saint Peter—

he come down on earth,

every twelve months

to see how many decent people he could find

on earth.

And he come in the shop,

Saint Peter come in the shop a-all bowed over and crippled up,  
as a beggar.

(170)

with beggar clothes on.

And John was a-beatin' steel, and he looked over and seed that old—  
that man a-lookin' like 'at and he rolled his eyes,  
and he was a-beatin' and he rolled his eyes—

Directly,

the beggar said—

(which it was Saint Peter), but the beggar says, uh,

“Man—

Said, “I don't know who ye are,”

But he said, “Would you give me somethin' to eat?”

(180)

He said, “I—I'm hungry.” [voice weak, fading to inaudible]

Well John went to the house,  
and got his wife to fix up a big platter—

a bowl of  
green beans,  
cornbread,  
cow butter—  
Farm eatin', on his farm.

And, uh—

And cornbread, and a  
big glass o' milk.

(190)

And—and, John didn't feed it to ye not skimmed—  
I mean skimmed!

He wanted his milk with the cream *on it!*

Milk wasn't good,

sweet milk ain't, if you skim it off,  
they called it *blue john!*

Made it look blue it was so weak,  
just about as well drunk water.

And so he brought it back and the beggar eat it, (200)

Smacked his mouth,

Said, "Thank you, Man."

And he went back to hammerin', and  
looked around, and that man was up,

A-crackin' his bones  
and all,  
and a-tryin' to get straightened up,  
and directly all them old clothes just vanished and there he stood with a *purple robe on!*

And spoke, and he said, "John—  
"I just was foolin' people up," (210)  
he said, "I was Saint Peter when I come in here!"

And he said—

And he said, "I'm a-checkin'."

And he said, "You have to have somethin' in you pretty good."

He said, "You've got somethin' in your heart, [H]  
"pretty good."

"Or you wouldn't o' given me that eatin'"

He said, "But bein' you done that,  
"I'm gonna give you three wishes!"

Said, "You can take 'em (220)  
for this life,  
or hereafter."

"Either one you want to do, it's *up* to you."

Well John says, [H]

"Well—

He says, "I'll take the first one,"  
     said, "I want it—the first,"  
         said, "I want it for this life."  
 He said, "Them there con-founded school younguns," [H]

He said, "They come by here from that little old school, (230)

And said, "They'll come in my shop here and me a-sittin' here tryin' to rest and slip my sledgehammer out,"

And said, "They'll get it out in the grass outside o' my little old shop,"  
 And said, "Hit'll get me all frayed up and I'll cuss!"

And said, "I wish—  
     "want it put,  
         if hit's that way—"

"That the next 'n that gets ahold o' my hammer—"

[two rhythmic coughs]

"That you can't turn loose,  
     it'll stick the handle to his hands."

And said, "just sledge him, till his feet jumps up offa the ground." (240)

Well—

Peter said, "That's one,

Says, "John—"

"What's the next?"  
     "Oh," he said, "you see that old rocker over there?"

He said, "It's wore down,"  
     and he said, "I get so tired—"

"in here o' beatin this steel and heatin' it,  
     "and—"

    "soot (250)  
     all in my eyes,  
     all in my clothes."

Said, "When I go over to take a rest," said "there's a confounded little old schoolboy in it—'rik-rik-rik-rik-rik-rik!'"

Said, "They'll come in here while I'm a-workin',  
*'rik-rik-rik-rik-rik-rik-rik-rik,*  
 and said, "That makes me cuss!"

Said, "frets me up, with that racket in here,"  
 Said, "I can't keep 'em run out!"

And said, "I wish—" (260)

"That the next 'n that sits in that chair it'll stick his sitter fast to it—"

"And it won't  
 get loose till I let it loose."  
 "Well," he says, "That's *two!*"

"Well," he said, "now what's the third one?"  
 "Ooh," he says, "my  
 beautiful fire-bush out 'aire—"

(Or thorn-bush, or fire-bush) [explanatory]

He said, "It seem like these low-down sons o' horseback riders—"

"Can't break nary switch offa no bush, only my beautiful fire-bush." (270)  
 And said, "I wish—"

"that the next 'n that reaches out  
 to get—to break a switch off—"  
 he said, "—look out 'aire how ugly it is,"  
 said, "they've broken it, it's about to die!"

And said, "A-all these other switches,  
 as they go on their trail,  
 to break off,

And said, "they want to break offa mine!"

"My fire-bush, the thorn what blooms those pretty blooms." (280)

And he said, "I wish—"

"the next that reaches out to  
 break a switch offa my fire-bush, or thorn-bush,"  
 said, "I wish it'll suck'im right down in it head-first."

"Well," he says, "John—"

He said, "I 's a-hopin'—"



“Bein’ you give me somethin’ to eat,

“I was a-hopin’ you took one wish

“for your soul’s salvation for hereafter.”

“But,” he says, “you didn’t.”

(290)

*“It’s your’n John!”*

“Well,” he says, “By God, that’s the way I want it.”

So—

John kept  
    goin’ on,  
        goin’ on.

Finally,

down at the Devil’s furnace,

he [spit]

hyeard about it,

    how bad John was a-gettin.’

(300)

He did, he got to gettin’ that—

    that kind o’ left him.

That left out of him, he growed colder—

a-beatin’ that steel, and got older, and

    sufferin’—

till it left him, and he got to cussin’ and fightin’ his *neighbor!*

*And John had got changed!*

the Devil had hyeard about it

    at the furnace,

    and he sent his, uh—

(310)

got his two boys out,

He said, “Son—

    (with

        little buck horns about that long)

He said, "You go, uh, fetch John in,"  
 said, "we've got to get him out o' there and get him here."

So—  
 he said, "Now you get him *fast!*  
 "*Quick,*" he said, "Don't you fool much time!" (320)

And—  
 that oldest 'n went—

and—

he went right in over the  
 shop sill,  
 hewed sill,

And just grabbed John right around the waist,  
 he said, "*Let's go, John!*"

He said, "*Dad's sent me after you!*"

And John was a-buildin' a (330)  
 set o' horseshoes

fer a—  
 a feller that was a-loggin' to git  
 to help people and his kids to git a little livin',  
*in the mountains!* [guttural]  
 'fore they couldn't stand up!

And he welded—

he welded corks on the end of 'em—

where I've logged at now,  
 welded corks on the end of 'em *that long,* (340)  
 where they'd *stick in rock and hold!*

I've seed horses with their legs broke,

loggin' out o' these mountains—

*been there!*

[Emphatic sniff]

“Well,” he says, “Son—“  
 he said, “uhh—

“Oh gosh,” he said, “I can’t leave this here people a-sufferin’!”

Said, “Just wait about fifteen, ten or fifteen minutes, and—

*“I’ll be right with you!”*

And so, account o’ him bein’ scared of his Dad he said, (350)  
 “You *hold* the steel and let me *hammer* it.”

The Devil’s boy got ahold o’ that sledgehammer handle,

And for just a few minutes there he thought he was doin’ well,  
 and when he happened try to let up, it—

it seed his hands was stuck, and give him a holler, and about that tight it was  
 a-je’kin’ his sleeve and him not not a-wantin’ the hammer and the hammer was a-comin’  
 up and down.

He ’gin to scream, and—

he said, “Oh my Gawd!”  
 he said, “What kind o’ hammer have you got?” (360)

John says, “I just got a sledge-hammer—

fer people like you.”

He said, uh—

He said, “You go,” uh— [clearing throat]

He said, “Will you *leave me alone*—

“if I tell it to get it loose?”

And the Devil’s boy said, “Yeah, oh Gawd!”

And John told it to let him alone,  
 and the hammer fell down on the ground, *klunk*.

And that boy took out over that sill— (370)

And he said he was a-movin’ on—

and just common bushes layin’

his legs went over,  
he didn't fool no time.

Went on in, and he said, "Did you get him?"  
he said, "Gosh, no!"

"Git him!" [??emphatic vocable? spit]

He said, uhhhh  
and he sent the  
next 'n, he said, "Now son, you get him!" (380)

He went in—

grabbed John, and he said, "Now—

*"John, let's go!"* and he said, *"One thing about it, you ain't gonna get me ahold o' your hammer!"*

Th' other 'n told him about it, he had.

Said, "You ain't gonna get me ahold o' that sledgehammer in yonder."

"Oh," he says, "Wait, uh"  
he said "I'm a-fixin' a wagon wheel for a family,  
a covered wagon, uh—

"Is broke a wheel down and a-sufferin, gonna die!"

And said, "Just wait till I got this wheel mended, (390)

"And I'll go right along wi' ye," and said, "You go back—

"there," he stood, "there—

"Back there's an old rocker  
you can sit in," and he just stood,  
and he was kind of afeared of John a little bit, you know—  
not trustin' him, and John,  
stepped back a little, needin' to rest a little, "Oh," he said, uh—

"Back there—"  
he said, "Back here," he says, "I got a *big old fork I made,*  
"a pitchfork," and says, "*We'll need that there in Hell!*" (400)

So John got back there a-lookin' for that fork,  
he didn't have nary 'n, he was just tellin' that,  
and he got back there,

huntin' for that fork,  
 and he'd made an old big pitchfork—  
 he'd made it home-made.

And that Devil, the young one kept standin' there  
 and his knees got weak—  
 John just kept huntin'.

His knees got weak— (410)

And he seed that chair and flopped down in it.

And all at once it begin to rock,  
 and he knowed he wasn't rockin'  
 went, *rock-rock-rock-rock-rock*  
 and it screekin'—

So, uh—

He 'gin to raise up—

went to raise up and it stuck to his setter!

And the chair was comin' up with him!

He 'gin to scream, said, "John— (420)

Said, "What kind o' chair have you got hyere?"

He said—

"Will you promise like your brother, to—  
 never come back around me?"

He said, "Oh my God, yeah!"

He told him to turn it loose and *he* took out.

A-movin' on, and it went on a few days.

And the Old Big-horned One come—  
 the Devil—the Dad, Big-horned one come,  
 and he come in over that sill, (430)

And got John—

And rolled him out,  
     drug him out over that sill,  
         and was just nat—uh,  
             beatin' the hide offa John.

Was a-tannin' him.

And all at once,  
     John happened to think—

O' the way he'd twisted cow's tails—

to load 'em, you know, (440)  
     in a wagon, or anything,  
         to twist 'em and make 'em go up in a bad place, or anything—

And he got ahold o' the Devil's tail—

And hadn't been for that the Devil 's a-getting' him,  
     he got ahold o' the tail and 'gin to twist that tail,  
         and he'd groan—

the Devil would groan,  
     and every time John would twist—

and make it hurt right bad to get his mind off his strength,  
     he'd pull him towards that fire-bush. (450)

And doggone, when he got that Devil in about ten feet o' that fire-bush—  
     *Phunk!*

*In he went upside down!*

An'—

So the thorn-bush just closed in on him—

stickin' them thorns in his body,  
     and he 'gin to take on in there.

And he says, "John—"

"Will you turn me out o' here?"

And he said, "Yeah, like your sons," (460)  
     he said, "if you'll promise  
         "to never come back around my place,"

“I’ll turn ye out.”

He said, “I’ll sure promise.”

So he told it to turn him out—

He went on—

never seed no more,

and John he kept hammerin’ in there—

hammerin’ and workin’.

Finally he took ill—

(470)

and died.

Deceased, passed away.

And the people missed that man. [voice catch]

There they was, nobody to—

to do the rough work,

to help.

And so atter he died,

he went

a-walkin’, a-whistlin’—

to Saint Peter’s door—

(480)

Heaven.

There—

pecked on it,

here come Saint Peter, and he *knowed him*.

He said, “John—

“Wait a minute,” he said, uh,

“You can’t get—

“I’ve got to check records hyere,” he said, uh—

“Let me get your record,”

and he got it—

(490)

And on the credick side—

John had a lot o' good things  
he'd done.

He said, "Now here  
is marked down—

"where—I put it down—  
and you give me somethin' to eat,  
when I come in there,"  
and he said, "It's good!"

Here on the credick side, but he said, "*God!*" (500)

"On this reverse side," he said, "of the wrong things,  
and cussin' you've done—

Said, "down through all that other line,  
is lines wrote *between* lines."

Said, "You can't come in here."  
"Well," he says, "that's O.K."

He went on down a-whistlin'  
towards the Devil's house.

And he got inside.

And that— (510)

youngest son happened to peep out 'tween the bars,  
and seed, said, "*Oh Gosh, Dad!*"

"*Yonder comes John,  
bar the door!  
bar the door!  
bar the door!*"

So—

John got on down,  
and the old Dad Devil peeped through a bar—

He said, "John— (520)

"We can't have you in *here!*"

Said, "You'd take our Hell *over!*"



Mmm. [emphatic guttural]

Old Devil, he went back, took a pair o' tongs—

and got out a  
big

coal o' fire as he could get out o' the furnace, and rech it out—  
through, 'tween those bars and said, "*Here, John—*

He said, "*You take this fire,*" he said,

"*You go out and go start a Hell o' your own!*"

(530)

And so—

I ain't seed it but one time—

yander towards, uh,  
through, uh,

Linville, and in there we were went—

O' the Brown Mountain Lights?

I believe that's where he started,  
and she's in there right now.

[long pause, raised eyebrows, laughter]

You'uns ever—you ever see 'em, the Lights?

J: Just heard you tell me about them.

(540)

R: You've heard talk about 'em?

J: Yeah, yeah.

R: Well you've heard others tell about it, ain't ye?

[Segue into discussion of the Brown Mountain Lights and so on.]