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THE "FIFTH ACT" AND THE CHORUS IN THE ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH BALLADS

WHEN THOMAS GRAY said of the ballads that they commonly begin "in the fifth act", he was suggesting that their appeal to the emotions is a result of their narrative structure, their emphasis upon single episodes, stories of action set in a dramatic or semi-dramatic way, with economy of language and often total absence of exposition. But the ultimate appeal of the finest of the ballads—the often-anthologized "Sir Patrick Spens" and "The Twa Corbies" for instance—goes beyond what we would call narrative appeal to something approaching the lyric; at their best they demonstrate an insight which is artistically conscious of itself. It is this "doubling back" upon the narrative situation, the explicit or implied comment upon the story, which gives to the superior ballads their ageless value. This capacity for meaning, however, is extremely interesting in that it does, finally, exclude a purely tragic awareness of life.

"Tragic" elements in the ballads have more or less been taken for granted. The well-known ballad scholar, Francis Gummere, locates the ultimate value of the ballads in their portrayal of man's acceptance of fate: "Tragedy, not pessimism, is their last word. Their deepest value is that they revive to some extent the impressions which . . . communal poetry could make, by means now impossible for any poet to command."¹ Gummere's phrase, "by means now impossible for any poet to command", also suggests the common romanticism surrounding ballad art. But the real tragic sense of the ballads is doubtful. This is not to say that their very limited and rudimentary form of art excludes all possibility of tragedy—all possible means of elevating an individual and a work; it is rather to say that the underlying consciousness of the ballads alone is not one that is sympathetic to a tragic view of life. The presence of what ballad scholars such as Gummere and Gordon Hall Gerould call "tragic situations" and an underlying consciousness that excludes a tragic view of life may seem at first contradictory. An examination of a number

of ballads which appear to possess tragic values, will illustrate, however, the distinction between the two—the simple presence of tragic incident in the narrative or fifth act, and the final ironical view of life of the lyric or chorus.

The "recognition" scene of tragedy is a very obvious device found in the ballads. The small group of ballads which concentrate on the illicit relationship between sister and brother often turns upon the disclosure of identity, which leads to death and despair. "Babylon" (Child 14) tells of a "banished man" who confronts three ladies, each of whom refuses him; he kills two of them, but is then told by the third that their brother will revenge them. When he learns that they are his own sisters he kills himself. "The Bonny Hind" (Child 50) tells of the discovery of an incestuous relationship after the girl and the man have become lovers; the girl commits suicide, the man returns to his father's house after burying her, and mourns for his "bonny hyn."

"Child Maurice" (Child 83) involves a husband's murder of a young man who has sent his wife tokens of love. The enraged husband meets Child Maurice in a "silver wood," fights with him, and beheads him:

And he pricked itt on his swords poynt,
Went singing there beside,
And he rode till he came to *that* ladye ffaire,
Whereas this ladye lyed.

And sayes, Dost thou know Child Maurice head,
If *that* thou dost itt see?
And lapp itt soft, and kisse itt offt,
Ffor thou louedst him better than mee.

But when shee looked on Child Maurice head,
She neuer spake words but three:
"I neuer beare no child but one,
And you haue slaine him trulye."

The husband then bitterly repents his deed. The situation, turning as it does upon a recognition of identity coming, of course, too late, could be called tragic. But an interesting variant of the ballad, version B, suggests a far different consciousness of what the story means. The husband simply says to his wife, after she has revealed the identity of Child Maurice,

"O wae be to thee, Lady Margaret," he sayd,
"An ill death may you die;
For if you had told me he was your son,
He should neer have been slain by me."

The introduction of a very simple, common-sense attitude jars with the pretensions of "tragedy". The effect of the concluding lines is to undercut and negate the "tragic" situation entirely.

Situations in which the victim is passive can be called only loosely tragic. "Glasgerion" (Child 67) turns upon an incident that results in the deaths of three persons, two of them "nobility", but of which none rises to a level commensurate with tragedy. The situation of "Fair Mary of Wallington" (Child 91) is pathetic, in a way horrible, but there is no sense of a choice made which deliberately calls down fate upon the protagonist. The ballad begins with a swift contrast of moods:

"When we were silly sisters seven,
sisters were so fair,
Five of us were brave knights' wives,
and died in childbirth lair."

The narrator of the first stanza apparently turns into "Fair Mary", who vows she will never marry; but when a knight seeks her for marriage she seems to accept at once the conditions of this marriage—the apparently inevitable death—without any real concern for the man involved:

"If here's been the knight, mother,
asking good will of me,
Within three quarters of a year
you may come bury me."

She is correct: but there is no indication of a conscious choice of love, a willingness to pay the price of death for this love; there is only the fatalistic passivity that these lines suggest. This same acceptance of death, with no consciousness of a choice of fates, is symptomatic of nearly all the ballads that involve death.

"Robin Hood's Death" (Child 120B), set entirely in the "fifth act" framework, occurs not as a result of heroic struggle against the sheriff's men, as one might expect, or as a result of Robin Hood's insisting upon attending Mass in spite of danger, but rather in a slow, passive, almost uneventful way. He says to Little John:

". . . I am not able to shoot one shot more,
My broad arrows will not flee;
But I have a cousin lives down below,
Please God, she will bleed me."

Robin Hood dies from loss of blood and gives instructions to Little John concerning his death:

"Let me have length and breadth enough,
 With a green sod under my head;
 That they may say, when I am dead,
 Here lies bold Robin Hood."

A more romantically heroic death is faced by "Johnie Armstrong" (Child 169), like Robin Hood an outlaw, who is killed in a fight with the king's men. Johnie has been deceived by the king, who has promised to pardon him:

But Ionne looke'd over his left shoulder,
 Good Lord, what a greivous look looked heel
 Saying, "Asking grace of a graceless face—
 Why, there is none for you nor me."

After he is wounded he says:

"Fight on, my merry men all,
 And see that none of you be taine;
 For I will stand by and bleed but awhile,
 And then will I come and fight againe."

This spark of individuality, of a vital personality defying fate and at the same time accepting it, which is necessary to elevate character, is found in "Mary Hamilton" (Child 173), the story of a personal maid of the queen—from one of the highest families in Scotland—who "gangs wi bairn/To the hichest Stewart of a'." She is later condemned to death for murdering her infant child. She emerges as one of the few distinct personalities in all of the ballads. Told she must go to "Edinbro" to be sentenced, and to put on her black robe, she says to the queen herself:

"I winna put on my robes o black,
 Nor yet my robes o brown;
 But I'll put on my robes o white,
 To shine through Edinbro town."

Going up the Canongate she "laughed loud laughters three", but coming down a "tear blinded her ee." Seeing ladies weeping for her,

"Ye need nae weep for me," she says
 "Ye need nae weep for me;
 For had I not slain mine own sweet babe,
 This death I wadna dee."

Her statement of remorse is put in these words:

"Last nicht there was four Maries,
 The nicht there'll be but three;
 There was Marie Seton, and Marie Beton,
 And Marie Carmichael, and me."

This combination of vitality and acceptance of fate is, however, not characteristic of the ballad heroes or heroines, whether they are of the primarily narrative or primarily lyric ballads. The tragic version of life seems to be neither that of the protagonists nor the unknown authors, though the incidents central to the works may seem tragic, or to possess a tragic potentiality.

"The Wife of Usher's Well" (Child 79) presents a situation "tragic" from only the mother's point of view; and this is why she mourns, and pronounces her curse:

"I wish the wind may never cease,
Nor flashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood."

The dead sons do return, but must leave again at daybreak. Version C introduces Christ to answer the woman's prayer by allowing her to receive her sons for a night; the sons then return to their tomb, and

"Go back, go back!" sweet Jesus replied,
"Go back, go back!" says he;
"For thou hast nine days to repent
For the wickedness that thou has done."

The woman's mourning and desire to see her sons again is taken to be "wicked"—an extremely unromantic moral judgment—apparently because it is against nature. That the woman is completely alone in her grief is evident from the extreme detachment of the poem—she is even called "carline" at one point—which not only objectively reports the cruelty of the world touching upon the woman, but sets up an implicit ironical antithesis between what the woman wants and what she can have, between her personal curse upon the universe and the ultimate impersonality of this universe. The "tragic" situation of the mother grieving for her dead sons loses its tragic edge by the focussing of the narrative not upon the individual so much as on the ironical tension between the wished-for and the real. Not only is the wife of Usher's Well denied tragic importance as an individual, but her situation itself is really denied tragic potential both through the detachment of the ballad and the explicit judgment which Christ makes in Variant C.

The well-known "The Three Ravens" (Child 26) also excludes a tragic consciousness of life, though for different reasons. The ballad is essentially a ballad of love, but one in which love is not equated with death in the way characteristic of a large number of sentimental and rather decadent love ballads; it presents instead a love which death cannot destroy, though this love seems to recognize the situation

for what it is. There is no implied reunion after death, or a fulfilment of love through death, not even the perfunctory graveyard symbolism of entwining rose and briar, or birch and briar. The structure of "The Three Ravens" exemplifies the ideal ballad form: there is the framework of the ravens' conversation, whose words constitute the poem, and whose observant comments constitute the "story". All details save what happens in the present are omitted; the circumstances of the knight's death are not described; there is not even a description of him or of his lady, a use of the convenient, mechanical terms that often accompany knight and lady. The drama is given at its most elementary level, nearly a pantomime; it is empty of irony, empty of any real despair or undue mourning, though its climate is certainly not Christian—it is, if anything, pagan, though to call it so would be to misrepresent it seriously. "The Three Ravens", whose simplicity is not to be mistaken for simple-mindedness, is as fine as any of the ballads which do not attempt a refinement of perception or ironic consciousness found in the two or three outstanding works. It is most interesting in this particular discussion for its pure utilization of the "chorus", its translation of action into perception and comment, so that the "story" becomes flattened, compressed, given to us through dialogue, and the fifth act—indeed, any action at all—is realized only through the detached observations of the chorus of ravens. The transition from narrative to lyric has been made, here, but its great artistic potentiality in ballad art is achieved more completely by those ballads which include a certain backward-looking comment upon the story itself, a more self-conscious use of the chorus.

The surface similarity of "The Three Ravens" and its famous counterpart, "The Twa Corbies" (Child 26), suggests a relationship between the two that is deeper than that which does finally exist. It is a mistake to consider "The Twa Corbies" simply a cynical version of the earlier ballad, a reversal of the theme of true love;² it includes an objective presentation of an obvious "false" love, but its meaning goes far beyond this. Its meaning, at bottom, goes beyond all human concerns; and this is the terrible irony of the poem.

"The Twa Corbies" is shorter by half than "The Three Ravens", consisting of only five stanzas, and it has none of its visualized action or moralizing concern. It begins with the false or mechanical "I", the narrator who soon disintegrates:

As I was walking all alane,
 I heard twa corbies making a mane;
 The tane unto the t'other say,
 "Where sall we gang and dine to-day?"

The complexity of the short poem is created through its ironic juxtaposition of two worlds: that of the human, and that of the bestial. These worlds are overlapped—the corbies not only speak, but use such a formal word as "dine" to refer to their scavenger's feeding. The world of human considerations, of a human contrivance of social and moral systems, is presented in terms of its negatives, for here the knight's hound, his hawk, and his lady have deserted him; they have not preserved the faithful love the three ravens had earlier observed. The knight has, in a double sense, departed from the civilized world, for his death is unknown: ". . . naebody kens that he lies there,/But his hawk, his hound, and lady fair." Here the term "lady fair" takes on an additional note of irony simply because it is so standard a phrasing, and implies perhaps a universal collaboration in betrayal among all "ladies fair". The almost mechanical summation of the knight's desertion by conventional symbols of faith and love is jarringly culminated by a conclusion in terms of a practical evaluation of these three betrayals:

His hound is to the hunting gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may mak our dinner sweet.

The impact of the faithlessness of hound, hawk, and lady, and the apparent treachery of the lady, are powerful in themselves, but they are overshadowed by the deeper significance of the poem, which presents the human in a situation devoid of all social, moral, or religious aids, devoid of all civilized values. The acts of love which soften the horror of death in "The Three Ravens" have vanished in "The Twa Corbies". The knight as a social being has become, here, no more than an incidental constituent of the natural process of consumption and decay. The grandeur of knighthood is reduced to organic material. The corbie says,

"Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,
And I'll pike out his bonny blue een;
Wi ae lock o his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare."

All is seen from the scavengers' point of view. The peculiar irony of the poem grows out of such lines as "We'll theek our nest when it grows bare", which suggests a concern on the part of the corbies for their own future creaturely comfort, and a permanence of relation denied the knight. The final vision of the ballad is one which outdistances all considerations of personal tragedy. It is not only the vanity of human values but the forlorn emptiness of the natural universe itself that echoes in the lines, stressed by the slowness of the long "a" vowels:

Mony a one for him makes mane,
 But nane sall ken where he is gane;
 O'er his white banes, when they are bare,
 The wind sall blaw for evermair.

Narrative has here become lyric. The corbies are the "chorus" of the drama, but the drama itself—the human tragedy—is already finished. Human tragedy is a matter of particulars, and will vanish; but the chorus of nature, of the natural universe, will not vanish, and its slow, sure, deadly vision constitutes an ironic consciousness of the way the world is.

That the ballad has here become lyric is evident from the fact that, as a story of a particular event—like, for instance, "The Hunting of the Cheviot" (Child 162)—"The Twa Corbies" is meaningless. The symbolic structuring, clearer here than in most of the finer ballads, suggests definitely both a conscious artistry and a concern for metaphoric meaning. A brief flash of something of this penetration into an evaluation of order and lawlessness is found in variant E of "Sheath and Knife" (Child 16). The lines are those of stanza nine:

The hawk had nae lure, and the horse had nae
 master,
 And the faithless hounds thro the woods ran
 faster.

"Sheath and Knife", however, in all its variants, does not approach the mastery of "The Twa Corbies". What is central is not the fact of death itself, but the indifferent response to individual death in a naturalistic universe. The emphasis is upon what we would call the unromantic and the untragic, a certain blurring of tragic action into broader significance, expressed by the detached chorus of the corbies—the old men or women of the village.

A synthesis of the "fifth act" of revelation and the detachment of the chorus is achieved in the famous "Edward" (Child 13B). This ballad has as its literal centre the fact of death, but as its metaphorical centre the illumination, by degrees, of a bitter irony. The obvious use of incremental repetition, which leads structurally to the revelation of both patricide and a woman's treachery, follows a pattern, like "Lord Randal", of an ordering or revelations in terms of their relative importance. Thus the climax is built up through increasingly significant answers, and the structural technique with its deliberate slowness of movement gives the work its emotional impact:

"Why dois your brand sae drap wi bluid,
 Edward, Edward,
 Why dois your brand sae drap wi bluid,
 And why sae sad gang yee O?"
 "O I hae killed my hauke sae guid,
 And I had nae mair bot hee O."

The mother is not satisfied with this answer and questions him further. He answers that he has killed his "reid-roan steid", but this also does not satisfy her. He admits finally that he has killed his "fadir deir." The mechanical formality of the work, however, will allow for no pause after this revelation. The movement is dance-like and formal, and must continue; and the mother immediately asks after his penance—

". . . whatten penance will ye drie for that?
 My deir son, now tell me O."
 "Ile set my feit in yonder boat,
 Mither, mither,
 Ile set my feit in yonder boat,
 And Ile fare ovir the sea O."

—and then after his legacies. His answers reveal his increasingly violent state of mind. He will let his towers stand "tul they doun fa", he will leave to his wife and children "the warldis room, late them beg thrae life." The climax of the series of disclosures is this reply to his mother:

"And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir?
 My deir son, now tell me O."
 "The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
 Mither, mither,
 The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
 Sic counseils ye gave to me O."

Again, the repetitive nature of the technique, the refrain of "Mither, mither", adds to the now revealed irony. Like "Lord Randal" (Child 12), the dialogue framework will allow for no episodic action, and the formalized diction, the emphatic rhythm of the words, contrast with the enormity of the crime committed and the final revelation of the collaboration of the mother in this crime. The gradual building-up in two parts—to the disclosure of the father's death, and then to the disclosure of the mother's "counseils"—with its flawless gradation, certainly argues a very sophisticated artistry. Beyond simply the "narrative" dialogue there is a conscious concern for the evoking of a certain emotional response in the audience, which ballad scholars have not, in general, recognized. Even if through oral transmission

details of the ballad are changed—the substitution of hound for hawk, for instance—the essential structural grasp of the ballad cannot change, or it would lose its meaning as an artistic unit. Again, the instance of death here does not suggest a tragic evaluation of life; the fact of death is flatly stated, a matter of the past, and it is the flash of irony at the end that makes the ballad so successful. In it the actors of the fifth act and the chorus—the formalized, almost detached revealers of what has happened—are more or less fused.

“The Twa Corbies” and “Edward”, two masterpieces of ballad art, are matched in the English and Scottish ballads only by “Sir Patrick Spens” (Child 58). The most famous version, A, is one of the shortest, and it gains from its compactness and lack of transitional and expository material. Indeed, what is explicitly told in the ballad is of less *literal* importance than what is omitted—we know the colour of the king’s wine, and that the Scottish ladies have gold combs in their hair, but we know nothing at all about what should be the central event of the ballad as narrative, the wrecking of the ship. The argument that the ballad art contains only the most essential details of an action is, then, clearly not applicable to the very finest ballads, if generally applicable to any. Actual detail is absent; we have instead symbolic detail, details which have meanings beyond themselves and which move toward, of course, a greater significance than literal or factual detail would suggest. The narrative content of the work is obviously suppressed; it is not a story that the ballad tells, surprisingly enough, but a revelation, finally, of a certain vision of life, a lyric expression of a view of death and of the vanity of the world.

The irony of the ballad is expressed through a series of contrasts. There is, first, the king who “sits in Dumferling toune,/Drinking the blude-reid wine”, who appears to be honouring Sir Patrick by asking him to make this important voyage.³ The ironic juxtaposition of the king in town and Sir Patrick, later, at sea, is matched by the king’s drinking of the “blood-red wine”: an obvious symbol of the king’s utilization of Sir Patrick (and of any of his subjects) on a very casual and predatory level. The irony is enhanced by the king’s apparent lack of malice, his lack, indeed, of any consideration of Sir Patrick as a fellow human being. The first great irony is that between arbitrary ruler and subject.

Sir Patrick, reading the king’s letter, reacts with mixed feelings:

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
A loud lauch lauched he;
The next line that Sir Patrick red,
The teir blinded his ee.

The impending voyage is both ridiculous and tragic: Sir Patrick, as a man of apparently magnanimous or at least worldly consciousness, must recognize and appreciate both the ridiculousness and the tragedy. The time of the year is dangerous, and one of his crewmen extends Sir Patrick's judgment by speculation upon the weather:

"Late late yestreen I saw the new moone,
 Wi the auld moone in hir arme,
 And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
 That we will cum to harme."

The irony of the situation is that the men must go to sea with a full awareness of their fate; and this awareness is so certain, so much taken for fact, that the next stanza of the poem treats only the lightest and apparently least essential details about the Scots nobles:

O our Scots nobles wer richt laith
 To weet their cork-heild schoone;
 Bot lang owre a' the play wer playd,
 Thair hats they swam aboone.

There is no depiction of the sinking of the ship, only the unmistakable meaning of the final line. And the movement of the ballad is decidedly away from the singularity of this catastrophe:

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
 Wi thair fans into their hand,
 Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spence
 Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
 Wi thair gold kems in their hair,
 Waiting for thair ain deir lords,
 For they'll se thame na mair.

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
 It's fiftie fadom deip,
 And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
 Wi the Scots lords at his feit.

The tragic potential is here suppressed and dissolved; if there is a "tragedy" it is not an uncommon one, and it is undercut at nearly every turn by a latent and very powerful irony. Thus the men who are not ordinary seamen, but Scots nobles, are visualized in terms of their apparel and their concern for this apparel. Their own vain concern is taken, ironically, by the narrator as a legitimate estimation of

their own worth, and they and their ladies emerge as ghostly figures with costly apparel and no significant lasting worth. The men are loath to wet their cork-heeled shoes, but their hats swim ashore: between these two statements the whole disaster occurs, but it is seen in only these apparently light observations concerning shoes and hats, as if these were really the most essential details to characterize the men. And there is the paradox of the hats which could, after all, swim ashore, though the men themselves could not. So with the ladies who wait with their fans in hand and their gold combs in their hair while their men die at sea. The final irony of the poem is that which groups the Scots nobles at the feet of Spens. The concern for rank and order suggested by the cork-heeled shoes and the combs of gold is parodied by this mock observation of rank fifty fathoms under the sea.

So it is that the sparseness of "essential" detail about the catastrophe is finally unimportant. It is not a narrative the ballad tells, but rather a statement about the human predicament. The series of ironical contrasts undercuts all pretensions to tragedy or even to an understanding of the pathos of what has happened. Many of the English and Scottish popular ballads do begin, as Gray said, in the fifth act; but a number of them begin when even this fifth act is over, when the tragic actors have left the stage and only the chorus remains to give universal and objective meaning to what has happened. The lyric expression of the chorus, whether the unknown narrator of "Sir Patrick Spens" or the corbies in "The Twa Corbies", is in a sense directly *opposed* to the tragic action that has occurred or is occurring, though irreparably related to it. The distinction is simply one of point of view. Where to the tragic actors the situation is particularized and tragic, to the "chorus" it is related to the abstract and symbolic, the timeless and cyclical re-enactment of the way the world is.

NOTES

1. Francis Barton Gummere, *The Popular Ballad* (New York, 1907), pp. 340-341.
2. See Earl Daniels, *The Art of Reading Poetry* (New York, 1941), p. 133.
3. According to Professor Child this ballad may or may not be historical. The ballad versions fall into two classes—the first giving little or no "historical" information, the second giving additional details. Thus in the second group the destination of Spens' ship is Norway; the object of the voyage (not told in G) is to bring home the king of Norway's daughter (or the Scottish king's daughter), or to take the Scottish king's daughter to Norway, where she is to be queen.