

THE FOLK BALLAD

BURNS MARTIN

NARRATIVE poetry includes such varied forms as the epic, the romance, and the ballad. These forms, whatever may have been the original relations among them, can be easily enough distinguished for our present purpose by the reader. The ballad itself falls into various categories: folk, or popular; broadside; literary. In some ways the broadside ballad, hawked and sung about the streets in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, is a degenerate descendant of the folk ballad, just as the literary ballad is a relative that has advanced in the aesthetic and artistic world. Every ballad, as a narrative poem, tells a story, but the folk ballad tells its story with a difference. The folk ballad was sung or chanted, and was very probably accompanied by some sort of dance. It deals with the simplest emotions: love, hate, the supernatural. Its material is usually tragic—feuds, war, murders, unfaithfulness in love—though there are a few whose material is humorous.

What, then, are the peculiar earmarks of this form? Though the folk ballad is narrative, it does not waste time telling us the whole story, but rather concentrates on the emotional high spots: the French critical dictum—"The art of boring is to tell everything"—can never be levelled at the folk ballad. Likewise the ballad wastes no time on introductory material; as the poet Gray, a great ballad enthusiast, said, the reader is not told what the ballad is about until he is four-fifths through it and then the story is suddenly revealed. For example, in "Edward" we find a mother asking her son why his sword is covered with blood, but it is not until the last line that we learn that she had urged him to kill his father. Even then we are not told why she had wished her husband dead; the poet's business did not lie there, but in giving to his hearers the great emotional crises of the story. In this way the balladist must have created suspense among his original listeners, as he does still among his twentieth-century readers. This vividness is increased by the ballad's being told to a great extent in dialogue.

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the folk ballad is incremental repetition; blocks of stanzas are repeated with only one or two words changed, but these seemingly minor changes advance the telling of the story. *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* is the best example of this technique:

O Good Lord Judge, and sweet Lord Judge,
 Peace for a little while!
 Methinks I see my own father,
 Come riding by the stile.

Oh father, oh father, a little of your gold,
 And likewise of your fee!
 To keep my body from yonder grave,
 And my neck from the gallows-tree.

None of my gold now you shall have,
 Nor likewise of my fee;
 For I am come to see you hanged,
 And hanged you shall be.

This block of stanzas is repeated three times, with *father* changed in turn to *mother*, *brother* and *sister*. Then comes the last section of the poem; here the repetition begins again with the change of the key word to *true love*, but the third stanza of the group is gloriously different:

Some of my gold now you shall have,
 And likewise of my fee,
 For I am come to see you saved,
 And saved you shall be.

Most people will agree that this is a very effective closing; incremental repetition creates suspense. The reader should note, too, that we are not told what was the maid's crime that caused her relatives all to disown her, but that her true love overlooked so magnanimously.

The language of the folk ballad is very simple and homely. Often it is dialect; in fact, our finest ballads are almost invariably in the language of the Scottish borders. Obviously the poet was no literary figure, and his audience were not interested in the finer study of language. The homely, unliterary flavour of the diction is increased by stock expressions: most people murder with a "little penknife" and run "over hill and over dale"; so, too, they enjoy "riding A' by the light of the moon". Comparisons are very simple: wine is blood red, and other objects are as red as the "blude-reid" wine or as green as grass or as red as a rose. Events happen in threes and sevens, and people are absent for three or seven years. When ladies of the upper classes are mentioned, they are invariably weighted down with gold, silver, and jewels; reading *The Twa Sisters*, one wonders how the younger sister's body floated in the mill

stream, so loaded was it with gold and jewels—but there are some questions that should not be asked.

A word should be said about the verse form of the ballad. The most primitive ballads have stanzas of two lines, very frequently in the form of question and answer. The standard ballad measure, to the amazement of Shakespeare's bottom, is "eight and six"; that is, the stanza consists of four lines, of which the first and third have eight syllables, and the second and fourth, six syllables. Only the second and fourth lines rhyme, a peculiarity that has led some scholars to think that originally the ballad always consisted of two lines, which were later broken into the present common form. One does not expect perfect rhythm or perfect rhyming in the folk ballad; indeed, if a ballad had perfect rhythm and rhyme, we should be justified at once in suspecting it of being a forgery. Many ballads have a refrain; this may consist of only two or three words, or of one or two lines repeated with every stanza; it may be merely a nominative of address, as in *Edward*, where we find frequent repetition of "Edward, Edward" and "Mither, Mither", or it may be only a nonsense refrain like "Downe a downe, hay down, hay downe".

Reference has already been made to ballads of the supernatural. The simplest use of the supernatural is when two true loves, separated in life by family feuds, are buried nearby in the same churchyard; inevitably a rose bush grows over each grave, one with red roses and one with white, and they twine above the two graves. Then we have a group of ballads in which the ghost of the dead lover comes back to haunt the faithless loved one, who in the absence of the lover has married another. Still more interesting are the ballads in which the visitant is not really the lover, but a devil disguised in that shape; only after the woman has left her house and gone on board a ship with masts of gold and sails of taffeta does the unhappy victim discover that the ship is only an illusion and that the supposed lover has a cloven hoof. Here we are obviously dealing with a Christian rationalizing of very old folklore; originally the visitant was, of course, from the "land of fairy". Examples of this rationalizing in various stages are *The Demon Lover* and *Thomas Ryner and the Queen of Elfland*.

Such characteristics naturally lead to enquiry concerning the origin of folk ballads. It should be obvious that these poems cannot be considered as finished court poetry or the product of poets trained in a literary tradition. To say, as some scholars

say, that they are not literature is, of course, absurd; they surely achieve the end of literature: the effective sharing of a great emotional experience. Plainly they have the earmarks of the common people. They were written, probably with some exceptions, for the common people by common people, who had their training, not at courts or in conventional "schools" of poetry, but among the people. Everyone in the audience knew the story to be sung; therefore, the work of the poet was not to give a lengthy introduction or numerous details, but to keep his audience in suspense so long as he could. (Indeed, the balladist was much like a messenger in an Elizabethan play, who, sent to deliver a message, kept from telling it until his auditors were almost out of patience.) The refrain gave the audience a chance to join in the singing, just as at a present-day dance the dancers may join with the soloist of the orchestra in his cacophonous efforts. Being the possession, in the main, of illiterate people, ballads were not written down, but passed from mouth to mouth and so from generation to generation. Consciously and unconsciously, then, in oral transmission changes would be introduced into the text of a ballad, so that now a ballad may exist in two or twenty versions, differing from one another little or much; indeed, so far do some scholars think that such change could go in oral transmission that they would say that ultimately *The Three Ravens* and *The Twa Corbies* have a common origin. This is not, however, a matter on which it is safe to dogmatize, for if memory may sometimes fail a story-teller, his audience, as any parent of a young child knows from sad experience, will not allow too drastic change in its favourite story.

Although we have a few traces of ballads before that time, most extant English and Scottish ballads date from the fifteenth century and later. Yet because the folk ballad had by that time such a clearly marked form as we have shown above, because this form is also found in the ballads of all the countries of Europe, and because scholars working in isolated simple communities in the 19th century found ballads being made on much the same patterns, a theory of origins was formulated, usually referred to as the theory of communal origin. In a primitive community an event of great importance—a murder, a fine catch of fish, a victory over an enemy—has taken place. Under the excitement of this event, the people gather together: soon a person begins to compose the story of the event. As all present know the details, attention will be paid only to the most exciting moments. Other persons may contribute a line or a

stanza, and all will join in a simple refrain or repetition of key words. In this way a ballad takes form. That is, in brief, the theory of communal origin. It seemed to explain the peculiar form of the folk ballad and the wide diffusion of that form; but like the theory of the social contract, in another field of research, the theory of the communal origin has been constantly under attack. Sometimes the critics have not been fair: they have taken it for granted that the advocate of the theory said our extant ballads had been composed communally, but no one has ever asserted that; supporters of the theory have always insisted that while originally the pattern was developed communally, soon the best poet in the community assumed leadership and so our present ballads are the work of unknown but individual composers, who followed, however, the form inherited from a dim past of communal workmanship. As the 19th century enthusiasm, partly German-made, for the folk recedes, we may expect still more criticism of this famous theory.

If the ballad was in the main the possession of the common people, when and why did it first attract the attention of literary men and audiences? In the 16th century we find a ballad enthusiast like Sidney, who tells us that as a child he never heard an old blind crowder (fiddler) sing the ballad of *Chevy Chase* but tears came to his eyes, and in the early 18th century Addison admitted his pleasure in ballads and tried to defend such a peculiar taste by showing parallels between rough ballads and the Homeric epics. But it was the pre-romantic movement that drew the attention of the literary world to the ballad. Fundamentally the pre-romantic movement was a turning away from the polish, wit, and sophistication of neoclassic literature; it needed, therefore, a source for simplicity of language, and direct, vigorous presentation of fundamental emotions. Perhaps the rediscovery of the ballad was the best contribution of pre-romantic primitivism to romantic literature. Bishop Percy discovered an old manuscript containing ballads; these he edited, rewrote and published; to-day we can afford to be shocked by his manhandling of his material, but if he had not dressed it up in this way for the undeveloped taste of his times, Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* would not have had the influence on romanticism with which we credit it. At the beginning of the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott made his great collection, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Mention of Scott brings naturally to our minds the influence of the folk ballad on the literary ballad, so popular in the romantic movement:

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Scott himself, all felt the revivifying effect of the folk ballad. It would not be too much to say that Wordsworth's simple poems, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* would not have been written but for the rediscovery of the homely folk ballad in the 18th century. The literary ballad can never be mistaken by the student for a folk ballad—it is uncanny how one develops a feeling for the genuine folk ballad—but its ancestry is unmistakable.

Our earliest collectors of ballads were enthusiastic amateurs who were not always sure of their material, and, as we have suggested, did not always respect that material scrupulously. During the 19th century scholarly interest in ballads grew in many countries of Europe but seemed to lag in Britain and America. It was a taunt from a European scholar that made Francis Child, the great Harvard scholar, devote himself to making the definitive collection of English and Scottish ballads; for years he carried on his work, collecting all known versions of folk ballads, classifying them, and comparing them with foreign ballads. In all, Professor Child found 305 different ballads. His great collection is indeed a monument more enduring than bronze.

With Child's work as a standard, interest in the collecting of ballads grew apace in the English speaking world, with the result that collections have been made in every part of America where English or Scottish settlers became isolated. Kentucky, Virginia, and Maine are among the states of the American Union that have given versions of these old ballads brought over from the homeland two or three hundred years ago. Two American scholars, Misses Greenleaf and Mansfield, have collected words and music in Newfoundland. Miss Helen Creighton, of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, has collected some fine specimens in her native province, and has been ably assisted on the musical side by Miss Doreen Senior, of London, England. It is well that such collections should be made before the art and the memory of the ballad have been destroyed by the advance of the radio and other forms of amusement. We should remember, however, that the ballad has not merely an antiquarian interest and value for us to-day. Our numerous budding poets usually lack virility in their works; nowhere can they find more easily the qualities they lack than in the homely folk ballad. As romantic poets found their salvation here, so might many of our versifiers.