

The Study of the Orally Transmitted Ballad: Past Paradigms and a New Poetics

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The study of the orally transmitted narrative and of the ballad in particular has been, up to now at least, relatively homeless, spoken of and treated by many—linguists, philologists, literary critics, folklorists, sociologists, anthropologists—but wholeheartedly adopted by none.

What is the orally transmitted ballad? Is it folklore? Partly, but as Alan Dundes points out, not everything orally transmitted is folklore and some forms of folklore are not orally transmitted (1966a:7). Is it literature? Wellek and Warren defend oral poetry and narrative as indeed worthy of serious literary consideration: “clearly, any coherent conception [of literature] must include ‘oral literature’” (1973:22). Is it anthropology? Lévi-Strauss tells us that the anthropologist studies oral traditions because he sees in them the keys to unconscious thought processes (1963:25).

Categorizing the oral ballad as a genre is difficult because it is interdisciplinary and all-encompassing. It is hard to define and delimit. It is anomalous, neither wholly linguistic nor literary; it is associated with certain marginal social classes and groups (the illiterate, the semi-literate, the rural peasantry, women, children), and thus has an important sociological and ethnological component. Further, its often dreamlike symbolism and mythic themes reach into the complex areas of mythology, legend, and psychology.

Oral ballads are complicated to study because there are no fixed, correct, or archetypal texts. There are no authoritative texts. In fact, there are no texts at all. Compared to the long history of literary criticism of written works, with all its various movements and critical orientations, the study of oral narratives has been somewhat unfocused and diffuse and has lacked appropriate theoretical supports and apparatus, namely, a poetics of balladry, a poetics of oral transmission.

My purpose in this brief contribution is to characterize what I take to

be the four dominant paradigms of past ballad studies, which still, in a way, influence modern research and to offer a few comments on the present state of affairs and on the need to develop a transformative poetics for the orally transmitted ballad.

With regard to the notion of paradigm, I am following Thomas Kuhn's well-known *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Each scientific community bases its research on a set of received beliefs, which define procedure and expectations and affect the selection, analysis, and interpretation of data—these are “paradigms.” Science students are given prolonged exposure to the consensus of opinion regarding the universe and its laws as determined by the scientific community that they enter. These paradigms are not only the preconditions for scientific work, but they also preempt any other approach that would ignore or undermine these basic, shared assumptions.

Paradigms are not exclusive to the natural sciences; humanists, as well, proceed from a store of received beliefs and favored methodological techniques and critical approaches. We are all aware of cases where theory for theory's sake seems to be the starting point and *a priori* literary, psychological, or sociological assumptions are imposed upon the texts at hand. “Popular,” “folk,” and “traditional” materials have also been susceptible to paradigm-dominated approaches.

Let us begin with Bishop Thomas Percy's decision, in 1765, to publish *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Percy's interest in these poems was purely antiquarian. He saved them from the fire only after consultation with some learned friends “who thought the contents too curious to be consigned to oblivion” (xiii). Percy appreciated the ballads as rare specimens of archaic poetry, which reflected earlier customs, language, and manners, but noted that “these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them” (xiv). Even though the attitude toward ballads and the concept of balladry has been substantially refined since Percy's publication of his collection, the Percian vocabulary of preterition has been and still is one of the most widespread ways of talking about ballads. From this we derive our first paradigm: *the ballad as relic, as an antique*.

The reaction to Percy was swift, especially in Germany. Johann Gottfried Herder combined an emotional anti-Enlightenment ideology with a hostility to everything tainted by French classicism and called for a return to Germanic national self-consciousness through mythology and balladry.

He sought out “natural” poetry as ardently as his French contemporaries sought “natural” man and posited the purer *Naturpoesie* to the artificial and affected *Bildungspoesie*.

Herder’s notion of the *Stimme des Volkes* left its mark on succeeding generations. The organic primitivistic paradigms of this period were further developed and articulated in the next century with the advent of the Romantic movement. The glorification of the unspoiled *Volk* and their poetry reached new heights. The major spokesman for this view and the first serious theorists and collectors of folklore (fairy tales, ballads, and so on) were the Grimm Brothers. The polarization between Art and Nature had, by this time, reached full flower and the Grimms restated Herder’s popular distinction in terms of the individual, known poet of “art poetry” and the collective, anonymous poets of “folk poetry.” Their contemporaries Clemens Brentano and Ludwig Achim von Arnim published the earliest collection of German folksongs under the title *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1806-8) and the Grimms published their own collection of fairy tales in 1812.

As the Romantic movement spread, collections of ballads appeared in greater numbers throughout Europe, most of these ballads being taken from old chapbooks and songbooks and not from contemporary oral tradition. At this time, the disciples of the movement shared the basic conviction of the communally poeticizing folk. This “folklore mysticism,” as Arnold Hauser dubs it (1951:I, 162), has been almost unanimously disavowed, yet to this day the basic intuition it contained, that of the essential collectivity of oral poetry, remains valid. Our second paradigm: *the ballad as the voice of a people, the voice of a nation*.

The last part of the nineteenth century marked a period of transition as numerous ballads collected from contemporary oral tradition in different European regions began to be published. Some important early collections were, in France, the Comte de Puymaigre’s *Chants populaires recueillis dans le Pays Messin* (1881); in England, F.J. Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98); in Italy, Constantino Nigra’s *Canti popolari del Piemonte* (1888); in Germany, L. Erk and F.M. Böhme’s *Deutscher Liederhort* (1893-1894); in the Portuguese area, Almeida Garrett’s *Romanceiro e Cancioneiro Geral* (1843 and 1851) and Theophilo Braga’s *Cantos populares do Archipelago Açoriano* (1869); in the Catalán area, M. Milá y Fontanals *Romancerillo catalán* (1853); and in Spain, Juan Menéndez Pidal’s *Colección de viejos romances que se cantan por los*

asturianos (1885).

Ballads had ceased to be a patrician amusement, a model of nationhood and communal poeticizing, and became subject to more serious historical and philological consideration. However, perhaps partly as a reaction to Romantic extravagance but also as a consequence of the study of the relation of epic to ballad, French and German theorists embraced the other extreme, namely, the literary and cultured origins of *all* poetry, written or oral. The “people,” the *Volk*, do not create; all poetry is the product of a certain individual at a certain time.

Furthermore, according to this view, this individually composed poetry, when popularized and assimilated by the lower social and educational strata, undergoes a process of decay. The main spokesman for this *Rezeptionstheorie* was John Meier, whose book *Kunstlieder im Volksmunde* (1906) stresses this higher to lower movement. This notion received its most memorable formulation from Hans Naumann in his term *herabagesunkenes Kulturgut* (1935:112), “deteriorated artifact or mentifact” in Heda Jason’s translation (1975). According to Meier and Naumann, the logical consequence of this apparently indiscriminate absorption of cultural goods by the lower classes is a process called *zersingen*. The concept of *zersingen* expresses the inevitable deterioration that the poems experience within the process of oral transmission: the “sunken” poems are “sung away.” This theory, which revolves around the idea that change is equivalent to deterioration, is still with us today. Alan Dundes dubs it the “devolutionary premise” and notes that it is based on the assumption that “the oldest, original version of an item of folklore was the best, fullest or more complete one” (1966b:17-18). Our third paradigm: *the ballad as an inferior adaptation and assimilation of “higher” culture*.

In Spain and the British Isles, however, a different approach developed as a direct result of the strength of orally transmitted balladry in those countries, as opposed to the relative paucity of oral balladry in France and Germany at the beginning of this century. The English and American ballad collectors acquired firsthand experience of the vicissitudes of oral transmission, and turned away from the problem of origins and dates to the study of ballad variation and style. Child printed all available texts, rather than select the most complete or most perfect. F.B. Gummere urged his colleagues to “forget the tyranny of dates” (1907:79). Phillips Barry wrote that “the same ballad as we know it is represented by an indefinite number of versions” (1914:76). In the introduction to his edition of Child’s ballads,

Kittredge claimed “we have no thought of the author of any ballad, because... he had no thought of himself.... [H]e is a voice rather than a person” (1932:xi, xxiv). Cecil Sharp maintained “the method of oral transmission is not merely one by which the folk song lives; it is a process by which it grows and by which it is created” (1907, rpt. 1965:12). In Spain, Ramón Menéndez Pidal affirmed “la variante no es un accidente fortuito y adverso... sino que es el modo normal de vivir del romance” (“the variant is not a fortuitous and adverse accident but the normal way of life of the ballad,” 1943:397). That the variant, previously viewed as deterioration, could also be admitted as positive transformation was an important step toward the understanding of oral poetry. In the English- and Spanish-speaking worlds, the concepts of “author” and “archetype” were rethought and the Romantic notion of the poeticizing masses reasserted, but with precision and subtlety: Sharp’s “communal choice,” Kittredge’s “communal composition,” Barry’s “communal recreation,” Menéndez Pidal’s “autor-legión.” An evolutionary, dynamic model was being developed in contrast to the previous static descriptive principles. Thus, our fourth paradigm: *the ballad exists through change and is defined by its variability*.

We are now at the threshold of modern work on the orally transmitted ballad. It would be foolhardy to try to summarize the immense amount of work accomplished since Bogatyrev and Jakobson’s groundbreaking essay “Die Folklore als eine besondere Form des Schaffens” (1929). I think we can characterize the general tendency of late twentieth-century oral poetry studies by stressing its eclecticism. Many different approaches are being employed parallel to each other: historical-philological, comparative and geographic, stylistic, formalistic, semiotic and structuralist, narratological, performance and context-centered, and so on.

This is a positive development. However, I think it is hard to break the spell of the paradigms of the past. Are we still unconsciously influenced by the old *Kunstpoesie-Volkspoesie* dichotomy? Can we study and grasp the workings of the oral narrative without automatic dependence on the safe, familiar, and permanent categories of the written? What should be the parameters of an oral poetics?

As I see it, this new poetics of balladry would be composed of three main approaches that would complement and unite each other like the three sides of a triangle. On one side would be the classical historical-

philological approach, on another the folkloristic approach, and on the third what I would call a transformative approach. Let us look at these more closely.

I think the philological, historical, comparative approach to balladry cannot be deemed obsolete. It includes such necessary activities as the collection, organization, and codification of oral ballad material and of the relevant manuscript and printed versions, stylistic studies and linguistic analysis, the establishment of diachronic correspondences (or lack of same) between the archaic ballads in early collections and broadsides and their modern versions. It encompasses the study of the interaction of the written and oral word, the selection and reediting process of the early printed versions, broadsides and chapbooks, the adaptation or rejection of printed ballads by oral tradition, the influence of modern commercial recordings, and the establishment of synchronic comparisons, for example, the relations between the same theme in different areas and among different ballad traditions.

The folkloristic aspect is equally important. Here I would include the study of the ethnological, anthropological, and context-centered elements of the oral ballad including the functions of the oral narrative in society as work ballads (harvesting, sheep-shearing, sewing, washing), ritual ballads for different occasions (weddings, Christmas, funerals), lullabies, children's play ballads, religious ballads, ballads that report historical or contemporary events, and so on. It also encompasses performance: when the ballads are sung, where, with whom, to whom, and what the audience's reaction is, as well as the sociocultural environment in which ballads are transmitted. The musicological component is important here as well: the different types of melodies and rhythms, singing styles, the influence of tunes on the verse line, and the significance of the danced ballads, for which we have evidence from all over Europe.

These two, the philological and the folkloristic, are essential and important aspects for the understanding of the oral narrative. But the third side of the triangle deals with the heart of the ballad, with its nature and essence, namely, its potentiality, or in Eco's terminology its "openness."

This aspect has been the most neglected. Several factors have hindered the study of the ballad's potentiality. Two of the most important are a) the need for easily accessible, multiple versions of the same ballad in order to analyze the phenomenon of transformation and variation and b) the paradoxical nature of the oral narrative itself. I would like to comment

briefly on each of these.

First of all, the establishment of a representative working ballad corpus is essential to the analysis of oral narratives. It is not sufficient, as in Propp's study of the fairy tale, to select one version or one tale as representative of all the rest. As far as possible, we need a substantial number of authentic oral discourses either collected in the field or gleaned from reliable collections. This involves compilation, codification, and international cooperation.¹

Secondly, the orally transmitted ballad is a paradox. It presents us with a Heraclitean situation—the only stable element is change. The ballad is constrained by fixed rules and conventions, yet it allows the generation of an infinite number of texts. It obeys certain grammatical, syntactical, and metrical requirements, yet offers open-ended expressive possibilities. A new poetics would need to recognize that oral poems are essentially different from written texts. Thus the methods, categories, and principles of what we call “literary criticism” or any other kind of text-oriented approach do not apply to the oral mode.

The difference between the oral and the written is not degree, but essence. Specifically, whereas written narratives are transmitted through manuscripts, books, periodicals, broadsides, and so forth, oral narratives are transmitted directly from person to person. The written work, preserved by paper and ink, can be long forgotten, then suddenly resuscitated in essentially the same fixed form. An orally transmitted poem must remain relevant and meaningful to survive. Since nothing is set down on paper (until the folklorist comes along, of course), the same narrative or poem will never be recited twice in exactly the same way. As William J. Entwistle notes, “The ballad exists only at the moment of performance”

¹Unfortunately, there is often a lamentable lack of information shared among ballad scholars studying different national traditions. For example, in a recent article, the respected scholar Lutz Röhrich, ex-director of the German Folk Song Archive, stated that a completely uninfluenced oral tradition can hardly be imagined (“eine völlig unbeeinflusste orale Tradition kann man sich ohnehin kaum vorstellen” [1988:356]). This might be true for the Germanic tradition, but it does not apply to others, such as the Hispanic. The Hispanic ballad tradition offers numerous examples of ballads evolving independently of any literary influence. Furthermore, contemporary field work in the past few years has brought to light some sensational finds of ballads thought to be extinct in modern oral tradition and which have been recently discovered; see, for example, Catalán 1989:29-47 and Trapero 1986 and 1989.

(1939:29). The oral poem is variable, the written poem is fixed.

The writer has a deliberative audience—a reader—who can pause, speed ahead, or turn back to refresh his memory. The writer can establish his or her own style, handling language in an unorthodox way, using difficult, arcane, willful syntax, demanding chronological jumps of the reader. The oral poet, on the other hand, must depend on the auditory memory of the listeners. This is an immediate and non-reflective situation. We are all familiar with the techniques the oral poet uses: conventional diction and versification, fixed formulae, phrases and epithets, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and parallelism. The oral word is dictated to the ear, the written word to the eye.

The oral ballad is suprapersonal. It transcends individual expression and makes one version of a ballad theme part of the ballad corpus or network of a certain ballad. In this sense, we can characterize one ballad sung by one individual as a collective phenomenon. Only within the context of collectivity is the individual version of a ballad possible. The oral poem is collective, the written poem individual.

The crux of these dichotomies is the temporality of the oral mode and the relative permanence of the written. This brings us back to the paradox that is the theoretical axis around which our poetics should revolve, namely, potentiality. Potentiality is double-pronged, extending from the past and into the future. It predicates and hypothesizes all the many versions that were uttered but never preserved; those that were lost, forgotten, and destroyed, as well as those that are still to be sung.

In conclusion, the task facing oral poetry scholars today is the formulation of an oral poetics that would define and mark out the uniqueness of oral poetry and describe its workings and its nature. And how can this be achieved? As Lucien Goldmann points out in *Le Dieu caché*, “la méthode se trouve uniquement dans la recherche même” (“only through research itself can the method be found,” 1959:7). Therefore, we can analyze multiple versions and accept all versions, including those fragmented, poorly remembered, and containing narrative gaps and lacunae. We can reject the idea of “text” and accept textual pluralism, vague boundary lines between groups of versions, overlappings, borrowings, mutual interaction, incoherencies, and illogic. Further, we can allow not only for the observed but also for the potential elements of the system. We should consider not only what is said, in all its fluidity and variability, but what is unsaid; not only what is present, but what is absent as well.

The elaboration of a new oral poetics is, at the same time, the search for its definition. And perhaps it would be based on this paradigm: oral narratives are living forms—materials that are still being actualized and will be complete only when, in Gordon Hall Gerould's words, "the last ballad has been sung by the last singer."²

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²1932:2. A shorter version of this paper was presented to the session "Theories of Orality and the Study of Oral Narratives" at the Modern Language Association in New York in December 1992.

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