

THE SEWANEE REVIEW

VOL. XX]

APRIL, 1912

[No. 2

SCOTTISH BALLADS

A ballad may be loosely defined as a short epic poem in lyric form, treating of a single action and (usually) its immediate consequences. It differs from the song in that the poet, almost invariably, keeps his own emotions concealed: he is but the teller of the tale, and the wrath, or grief, or pity are those of his personages. From this point of view we might call Schiller's "Diver," Southey's "Old Woman of Berkeley," Tennyson's "Victim," and Cowper's "John Gilpin" ballads.

But the poetry here to be considered consists of Popular Ballads. The popular ballad is a species of poetry which has arisen among the people as distinct from the literary class: it deals with subjects in which the people generally will feel interest, therefore with things touching them nearly, or at least within their mental horizon; of subjects which have interest in themselves, apart from the mode of treatment. It is simple in style, and swift in progress; it eschews literary graces, such as classical allusions, suggestions, figures, or ingenuities of versification; it is, above all things, sincere in tone.

Now if we apply these canons to the four pieces mentioned, we shall see that they are all excluded by our first canon, all being obviously (even if we did not know the authorship) the work of literary men. The "Diver" and the "Victim," reciting happenings in distant lands and dim remote times, are excluded by our second canon as lying outside the popular horizon. "John Gilpin," being only a story of a London citizen whose horse runs away with him, would be excluded by our third canon, the

subject having little interest or consequence in itself. The "Old Woman of Berkeley" would be excluded by our fourth, for though it deals with a popular superstition very suitable for ballad poetry, it does so in a mocking skeptical style—the poet does not in the least believe his own story — while the genuine ballad is always sincere.

Genuine popular ballads, arising among the people, repeating their natural thoughts and feelings, and treasured in their memories, will deal with subjects within their possible, if not actual, experience. Deeds of patriotic heroism, of personal prowess, terrible or lamentable catastrophes, love and the sufferings of unhappy or guilty lovers, will form the most common staple. The nearer they come to the individual, the more likely they are to be popular: the feuds of a family or clan, rather than the wars of nations; the love of a simple knight or squire, rather than that of a king.

I think we may be sure that a far greater number of ballads have been composed and attained popularity, than those which have been preserved entire or in fragments. Accident and time would account for the loss of many; and many, no doubt, perished for lack of the elements which would have given them permanency.

The operation of the general law of the survival of the fittest and passing of the less fit, during the period of oral transmission has, I think, hardly received sufficient attention from students of ballad literature. It must have had a levelling effect, and tended to eliminate both the worst and the best poetry: the worst, because it would fail to interest or charm, and the best, because originality, or depth or subtlety of thought or feeling appeals to only a few, and not to rude and simple minds. Browning's psychological studies and penetrating analysis would have fixed a ballad-singer's audience in a vacant stare of incomprehension. The work of a more richly gifted singer would not (as in the world of letters) tend to lift up his contemporaries and successors. This cause has operated in reducing the whole mass of ballads to a certain general level, and in eliminating the personal note. The ballad-writer aimed, not at saying things as they had never been said before, but at saying them as they had

always been said. *Proprie communia dicere* was just what the ballad composer eschewed. Certain phrases, certain modes of action, became stereotyped, as it were, and were expected by the audience. Thus the ballads, either by normal composition, or by attrition, or by elimination, have been levelled to such a similarity that not only can we not group them by probable authorship, but often cannot certainly fix the locality of their origin.

But as the ballads came to be committed to print, the operation of the law of elimination ceased. The veriest doggerel, once embalmed in type, may escape annihilation for centuries, be exhumed by an antiquarian, reproduced by some society in a luxurious edition, and, like the works of the hapless John Lundic, be scorned and flouted by its own editor. And when men can get their history, traditions, or poetry printed in books, they begin to cease handing them down by memory. Old songs and ballads may linger awhile, recited at the fireside, or sung at merry-makings, but the production of popular ballads gradually ceases. Then follows the period of neglect, and then the production of literary imitations, which may be weak echoes, or utterly out of the key, or may be really good poetry, but are, in every case, something quite different.

The difficulties and obscurities which beset the whole question of the ballads,—and they are most perplexing—may be grouped under three heads: their age, their authorship, their authenticity.

With regard to their age, if we were guided by language alone, we could say positively that not one is older than the seventeenth century. The Scottish diction is very modern; it is liberally sprinkled with Southern words, and allusions to Southern manners. This, however, might easily be accounted for. The ballads have been preserved for generations orally, few, it would seem, having been committed to paper before the eighteenth century. If they were current in men's mouths when the Bannatyne and Maitland MSS. were compiled, the compilers did not think them worthy of transcription. The reciters would naturally vary the text by default of memory, or with a view to improvement, or by substituting a later word for one that had become obsolete.

In this way the language would be, more or less, in continual flux; and different versions would present great verbal differences. The only certain criterion is a negative one: if a ballad commemorates an identifiable historic occurrence, we know that it was not written before that occurrence. For instance, we know that "Johnnie Armstrong's Last Good Night" was written after 1528. But even here there comes an uncertainty: some older ballads have been altered to fit later occurrences.

One critic takes the ground that the original composition of any ballad must have been pretty near the occurrence that it commemorates, because, he says, facts are handed down by oral transmission for not more than three generations. He offers no proof of this assertion, and it is certainly not self-evident.

At a time when scarce any but churchmen and wealthy nobles could write, and books were almost exclusively the property of the clergy, the literature of the people must have consisted almost entirely of traditions and stories handed down from father to son, and told at the fireside. Events that were insignificant in history might have deep and enduring interest as the experience of an ancestor, or part of the body of clan-tradition. Local associations would keep memories alive: a ford where a youth was drowned; a pass where a stubborn battle had been fought; an aged tree which had served for some execution of justice or vengeance; a blackened ruin that told of a memorable raid—such things would have a local immortality; and the tales would live in men's minds until some poet embodied them in verse.

It is true that popular ballads were sung in very early times. Barbour, writing in the last half of the fourteenth century, excuses himself for omitting to tell of the victory of Sir John Soulis over the English at Eskdale, on the ground that

"Yong wemen, quhen thai will play,
Sing it amang thame ilka day."

And in the *Complaynt of Scotland* (sixteenth century) we have a list of tales and songs, some of which correspond, in subject at least, to extant ballads. But we cannot identify them with any

of the ballads which have descended to our time. The utmost that we can say is that it is possible some of the ballads may have originated in the fifteenth, or even the fourteenth century, but that the texts as we now have them are two or three centuries later, and we do not know how far they represent the ancient originals, if such there were.

The very earliest historical incident which is held by some critics to be commemorated in a ballad, is supposed to be the foundation of "Sir Patrick Spens." Sir Patrick, a skilful navigator, is sent by the King of Scots "to bring hame the King's daughter of Noroway." He goes in safety, but on his return encounters a storm which sinks the ship with all on board. Now the phrase "to bring hame the King's daughter of Noroway," would seem to mean to bring a Norwegian princess to Scotland; but there is no record of any such voyage ending in shipwreck. So some have supposed that the voyage was undertaken to carry a Scottish princess to Norway. Hence there arise three conjectures: The first is that it refers to the expedition sent by Alexander III in 1281 to carry his daughter Margaret to wed King Eric of Norway. The outward voyage was prosperous, but the ship on its return, after leaving the princess, encountered a storm, and some persons perished. The second supposition is that it refers to an expedition sent by the Regents of Scotland, after Alexander's death, to bring home his granddaughter, the daughter of Eric and Margaret, who was the lineal heir to the throne. She was certainly the King's daughter of Noroway; but there is no record of any shipwreck in this case. The third supposition is that it refers to an expedition dispatched by James III, about two hundred years later, to bring his bride, the daughter of the King of Denmark. But here again there is no record of any shipwreck. My own opinion is that the ballad has no historical foundation. Certainly the text, as we have it, is not older than the seventeenth century.

The latest verifiable historical incident serving as the foundation of a popular ballad, is the rescue of Kinmont Willie from Carlisle Castle by the Warden, Scott of Buccleuch, in 1596.

Mr. Jamieson, in his *Popular Ballads and Songs*, and afterwards in his *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, has pointed out the similarity between the Scandinavian and Scottish ballads as a whole, as well as between individual ballads turning upon identical, or at least similar incidents, from which he argues that the two have had a common source. We know that a very considerable Scandinavian element entered into the population of Scotland, and that in early historic times the western and northern islands and a considerable portion of Scotland itself were under Scandinavian rule. I might add to this two other elements that appear in the ballads, which are frequent in Scandinavian sagas, but are wholly alien to the original and indigenous Scottish literature: the delight in revolting atrocities, such as women or children burned to death, and mutilations or other atrocious vengeancees or punishments; and secondly, the strange supernatural element, to which I shall refer later. These qualities are conspicuous in the old Norse poetry, and markedly absent from the older Scottish or English literature. It is possible that their invasion may be due to Keltic influence—a point which I shall presently consider—but there still remains the *crux*:—how did these find their way into the ballads and yet not leave any trace in the written literature?

One must not, however, let similarities carry us too far. Many of the motives, such as vengeance for the slaughter of a kinsman, the abduction of a wife, punishment of a faithless spouse or lover, cruelty of a stepmother, jealousy between sisters, betrayal and abandonment of a woman, belong to the literature of all races and ages. They may happen anywhere and at any time, and the local poet merely gives them place and name.

Many of these problems might be solved if we could answer the unanswerable question: Who were the original authors of these ancient ballads? That they were not of the literary class we know, as we have a catena of literary poetry from the fourteenth century down, and style, diction, mode of treatment, feeling—in fact the whole conception of life and of poetry—are altogether different. Fletcher of Saltoun, in a much over-quoted passage, remarks: “I once knew a very wise man who

said, 'Let me make the ballads of a people——', and so forth. Then Fletcher's very wise man said a very foolish thing. Being a wise man he could not have done it. Wise men, not a few, have tried their hands at it with disastrous miscarriage.

The whole matter is one of the most vexed questions in the history of literature. How popular ballads have arisen, how they were developed and modified, are questions on which a prodigious amount of scholarship, antiquarian lore, ingenuity, paradox, and wild absurdity—even to the extent of maintaining that popular ballads have not been composed by anybody, but have come together by a spontaneous crystallization of fluid memories and feelings—have been lavished. Upon this sea of fog and mist I will not embark.

I think we shall find safe footing if we take the ground that if there is a poem, there must have been a poet. The incidents, if invented, presuppose an inventor; if historical, must have been common property. Some person or persons put them together into a poem, which others learned to repeat. Changed they have been, of course; but there is no escaping the admission that they began with somebody. "Somebody must have thought of everything first: I can see that," said Lucius Balbinus.

A favorite theory is that of wandering minstrels who composed ballads on popular themes, and went from place to place, singing them. Minstrels we know there were at the courts of the Angevin kings, but their songs were for the court—lays of chivalry, of love, or of devotion. Their office was held in high esteem. But were there such minstrels in Scotland? Two are pointed out: Blind Harry in the fifteenth century, who recited the exploits of Wallace, and Nicol Burne at the end of the seventeenth. But neither Blind Harry nor Burne left any ballads. Their productions are distinctly literary. The *Wallace* is a long epic poem in twelve books, in ten-syllable couplets. The author shows his reading, knew Latin, and addressed a cultivated audience. He recited to nobles and gentlemen and was a pensioner of the king. Burne's extant productions are pure songs, having nothing of the narrative character of the ballad.

Those who contend for the minstrel theory point to records of payment by the court or by cities to minstrels, and to laws

punishing vagrant minstrels as vagabonds and strollers, with exception of those who were employed by nobles, gentlemen, or cities. But there is no proof that these were anything but musicians. Some of them may have sung to their own accompaniment; but that there were any poets among them there is no evidence at all, and surely there should be some. And it may be noted that the word minstrel is hardly known to the old ballads, though in the sense of musician it is found in the romances.

That there were strolling ballad-singers may be readily admitted. But what we want is not Autolycus the peddler with his bundle of printed ballads about a "fish that appeared upon the coast upon Wednesday the fourscore of April," nor Sidney's blind crowder singing Chevy Chase to his humble instrument, but the man who put Chevy Chase into song. Autolycus does indeed give the composer of his fish-ballad against the hard hearts of women, namely the fish herself; and this does in some sort concur with Steinthal's view that the ballads were not composed by any person; but a study of the character of Autolycus makes me hesitate to accept his testimony.

To pursue the difficulties further would be tedious and unprofitable. The reasonable conclusion is that the old popular ballads were composed by persons whom we can neither name, identify, nor date; that they were diffused and perpetuated by oral transmission, undergoing many changes in the process, and that the versions as we have them can claim no great antiquity.

The third question is that of authenticity. This is a different question from that of the antiquity of the text. We know that, supposing a given ballad to be of older composition than the seventeenth, or close of the sixteenth century, we have not the ancient original text. As I said, by default of memory, by the substitution of more familiar words and phrases, perhaps by considerations of the metre, the rhymes, or the grammar, these have undergone alterations to an unknown extent. In this there is no intentional bad faith. But to foist in new matter; to aim at effects foreign to the original; to trim and polish the text to suit new standards of taste or the editor's notions of literary propriety—this is fraud and forgery, and of all this they have suf-

ferred much. In the eighteenth century certain canons of taste prevailed, and editors who dealt with this poetry, like Macpherson with his Gaelic traditions, thought they were doing excellent service by pruning away crudities, softening harshnesses, polishing the metre, adding noble or pathetic touches here and there, and generally making it more like what it would have been had they written it themselves. Allan Ramsay, to whom we can forgive much, was a grievous offender in this sort, and in his work the conflict between an instinct for nature and simplicity, and his acquired ideas of what Donne calls "poetiqueness," produces dissonances that curdle the blood. But Bishop Percy—peace to his manes for preserving the precious folio—was a far more heinous malefactor. He, at least, should have known what an editor's duty is; yet he did not hesitate to fill up gaps, to curtail here and to expand there, to inlay elegant flowers of eighteenth century grace and sentiment which set a reader's teeth on edge by their intolerable incongruity; and all this without a word of intimation to the reader, keeping his manuscript-book carefully concealed, but happily not destroying it, as Macpherson did with his manuscripts. Percy's own phrase, that the ancient ballads are "in the true spirit of chivalry," shows how utterly he failed to seize the ballad spirit. For the spirit of chivalry, meaning a high standard of personal honor and good faith, magnanimity toward an adversary, gentleness and tenderness toward the weak and toward women, an abhorrence of barbarity and cruelty, such a spirit as we find in the old romances—this is exactly what does not characterize these ballads.

Less injurious, though hardly more honorable, was the attempt to palm off complete compositions as genuine old ballads. Pinkerton tried his hand at this. Cromek's *Nithsdale and Galloway Song* is mostly forgeries and interpolations. Allan Cunningham's *Songs of Scotland* is cooked, doctored, and stuffed with his own manufacture. The practice became epidemic toward the close of the eighteenth century, when men of literary gifts and talents thought it a capital joke to pass off compositions of their own as genuine antiques, just as Steevens later illustrated Shakespeare by scraps of old songs and the like, most

happily apposite—only he made them up for the occasion. Cunningham palmed off forgeries upon Cromek, and Surtees chuckled with glee when he inveigled Scott into printing “Barthram’s Dirge,” and “The Death of Featherstonhaugh” in the *Border Minstrelsy*. Among them they succeeded in throwing suspicion on all the ballads.

The story of the transmission of these ballads is not so perplexing. After printing became common, they were printed on broadsides and sold by strolling peddlers and others. Lovers of that kind of literature collected them, as in the case of the celebrated Captain Cox, who, as Laneham tells us in 1575, had more than a hundred. They were often pasted on the walls of country houses, and Addison tells us that he found the “Children in the Wood” in that situation.

In the reign of James VI editors began to collect groups of songs and ballads belonging to certain localities, and to publish the collections in what were called “Garlands.” Dryden was struck by the vigor of some of the old ballads, and included several in the *Miscellany Poems* which he edited. Playford, in his *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (generally attributed to d’Urfey), has a few in very corrupt versions. The dramatists are fond of introducing bits of ballads; and Master Merrythought, in Fletcher’s “Knight of the Burning Pestle,” is as full of scraps of ballads as Sancho Panza is of proverbs.

The first considerable published collection of English ballads appeared in 1723, followed by a second and a third part in 1726 and 1727. The editor (thought by some to be Ambrose Phillips) is a little apologetic for introducing such rustic and homely verse to the refined public. In 1724 Allan Ramsay brought out his *Ever-Green*, a collection of old Scottish poems, largely from the Bannatyne MS.

About the middle of the century there were signs of a renewed drift in the direction of poetry of nature and simplicity, together with a more correct notion of an editor’s duties. Capell, in 1760, published his *Prolusions*, in which he conscientiously adheres to the integrity of ancient texts, and gives an unsophisticated version of “The Not-browne Maid,” which Prior had so bedizened in his “Henry and Emma.” In the

same year prodigious interest was aroused on the subject of ancient romantic poetry by Macpherson's *Ossian*, and the controversy that raged around it. In 1764 appeared Evans's *Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards*. At the same time Gray was writing his "Bard," "The Descent of Odin," and other poems in the same line; and the ill-starred Chatterton, in pieces like "Syr Charles Baudwyn," came nearer to the true ballad style than anyone else. A strong interest in traditional popular poetry was awakening.

And now, the time being ripe, occurred the most important event in the history of English ballad poetry.

There was a vicar of a Northamptonshire parish, one Thomas Percy, the son of a grocer, but very anxious to filiate himself upon the great Northern family of that name. Percy was an Oxford graduate with a taste for literature and antiquarianism. While on a visit to a friend, he saw an old MS. folio knocking about in a sadly dilapidated condition, the maids having occasionally torn leaves out of it to light fires. Seeing that it contained poems, Percy begged it. He also, later, got hold of a quarto MS. containing similar pieces, but copies of printed poems. In 1765 he published his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Percy was a little afraid that the pieces might seem rude and uncouth in so refined an age, and prefixed an apologetic preface. To take the bad taste out of his readers' mouths, he added a few elegancies by Shenstone, Grainger, and others.

This we can readily pardon; but what is not so easy to forgive is his manipulation of his texts, which he polished and trimmed and dressed up in various ways, slipping in elegancies and graces of his own—all without intimation.

Critics like Ritson, who knew old work, immediately detected the false notes, and called on Percy to produce his old folio; but this for a long time he refused to do. He yielded, however, so far as to let a few persons see the book, but would not let them collate it with his text. Not until 1868 was it printed in full and accurately. I may add that it was by no means an ancient manuscript, having been written about the middle of the seventeenth century.

The *Reliques*, though sneered at by the hide-bound classicists, exercised a great influence. They started a general collecting of old popular poetry. In the Scottish field, Herd's collection was published in 1769; Hailes' *Ancient Scottish Poems* in 1770; Pinkerton's collections in 1781 and 1783; Johnson's *Scots Musical Miscellany* (of songs old and new) in 1787 to 1803; Ritson's *Scottish Song*, 1794; and Sibbald's *Chronicles of Scottish Poetry* in 1802.

The next great event, after the appearance of the *Reliques*, was the publication of Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in 1802-3. Here for the first time we have in the editor the combination of poetic genius, enthusiasm for the subject, and historical and antiquarian knowledge. Scott added considerably to the treasure of traditional poetry collected from manuscripts, from the recitations of hawkers, shepherds, and old women, and his inspiring work stimulated others. Robert Jamieson brought out his *Popular Songs and Ballads* in 1806. Motherwell, in 1827, printed his *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern*, with an excellent introduction and notes. In the same year Kinloch printed his *Ancient Scottish Ballads*. In 1828 a new field was opened in Buchan's *Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland*, thus supplementing Scott, whose researches were almost wholly limited to the southern border. Since that time there have been many publications on the subject; by far the greatest of all being Professor Child's monumental work.

And now to speak of the general characteristics of these ballads.

The loose definition given at the outset would cover the productions of literary men. The subject for consideration is the popular ballad of unknown authorship, handed down orally, in most cases, before it was committed to writing.

In comparing these with literary forms, we find marked differences in both the conception and the mode of handling.

Perhaps the most striking difference is the impersonality of the ballad. The composer never lets his own presence be felt. Just the opposite of the writers of the old romances, who perpetually injected their own sympathies, the balladist says nothing of his own feelings. If sympathy is to be expressed, it must be by some

one of the personages: the victim's mother must beat her breast, or his love rend her golden hair, or his little son vow revenge. Nor does he ever draw a moral, and bid his hearers beware of sudden wrath or jealousy, or even unhallowed love, however grim the catastrophe. He tells the story simply and straightforward: this was what happened; you may make what application of it you please. Pointing a moral, as well as adorning a tale, is a pretty certain mark of forgery or interpolation. Scott, in his "Eve of St. John," shows the hand of a modern when the spectre of her murdered lover warns the lady of the guilt of lawless love; a thing no ancient ballad-maker would have done. In fact, the genuine ballad eschews all marks of literary design: the poet has a tale to tell, not a sermon to preach. Any intimation of such a design renders a ballad suspicious.

There is never any attempt at subtlety or peculiarity of passion. The passions are always simple and primitive: love of kindred and friends; devotion to the clan or chief; love between the sexes; hatred of an enemy; courage in combat or peril; triumph over a vanquished foe; indignation at the treachery of an enemy; rejoicing at successful treachery on our own part; wrath, blood-thirstiness, cruelty—in fact, I may say that the whole moral atmosphere is pagan.

It is no answer to this to say that the ballads are full of Christian allusions to saints and to "Our Lady." In "Brown Robyn," when the hero is drowning, "Our Blessed Lady" asks him if he prefers to be put on shore, or to go to heaven with her; or when the carline's dead sons visit her, wearing garlands gathered in Paradise, we have Christian allusions, but there is no more religious feeling than in *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* himself—except for praying, of which he knew nothing—would have felt quite at home in this atmosphere. Only in the ballads that deal with the supernatural is there any distinct reference to a future state, and then it is a sort of ghost-land, like the Keltic Other World. The dead revisit the living, mostly at night; the grave-worms fret at their absence, and the cock-crow compels their return. But, for the most part, life is a space to make love in and to fight in; and the hero's duty is to fight bravely and

to die courageously, bequeathing a legacy of vengeance to his children or kindred.

So with regard to the relations between the sexes: they are about the same as in Greece of the heroic age. A young man meets a damsel in the wood, as Milton's Zephyr met Aurora; or a damsel admits a youth to her chamber with the same primitive result. The damsel's parents or brothers may be angry, especially if they had intended her for another husband, but it is rather from disappointment, or because he is a hereditary enemy, than from a sense of outraged morality. In the ballad of "Clerk Saunders," Margaret's seven brothers find their sister sleeping in her lover's arms. Six find the offence natural and pardonable, but the seventh kills the sleeping man. The father has no reproaches for his daughter, but consoles her for her lover's loss. No stigma seems to attach to the offspring of these illicit unions.

Another extraordinary feature of these ballads is the incredible atrocity or hardness of heart of many of the personages. In "Burd Ellen" the cruelty of the hero (if I may call him such) to his mistress, is equalled only by her intolerable meekness. In the "Gay Goshawk," when the lady sinks in a death-like swoon, her brothers drop melted lead on her cheek and lips to see if she is alive. Cospatrick weds seven ladies successively and cuts off their breasts. In "Edom o' Gordon" the burning to death of Lady Forbes and her children is minutely described, and as if this was not enough, Gordon catches on the point of his spear a little girl that was let down from above. In "Jellon Graeme" we are introduced to that worthy sitting in Silverwood and sharpening his sword to kill his mistress who is pregnant by him. He stabs her while she is praying for life. It appears that in the pangs of death a babe was born, for the poet tells us:—

"He felt nae pity for Lily-Flour
When she was lying deid;
But he felt some for the bonnie bairn
That lay weltering in her bluid."

He rears the child and calls him his nephew. One day, when hunting at the place of the murder, Graeme tells the boy the truth, and the boy kills him on the spot.

Burning wives to death for unchastity is a not uncommon form of punishment, though there is no record of its ever having been inflicted for that offence in Scotland. "The Fire of Fren-draught," "Mary Hamilton," and others, have the same feature of atrocity; and though they are comparatively modern, they keep the characteristics of the older ballads.

It would seem that—as in the case of some of the Elizabethan dramatists—to awaken popular pity required a good dose of the crudest horror. The *dura messorum ilia* were not responsive to gentle solicitations. And the balladist had not the advantage of scenic illusion, so had to paint his pictures in vivid colors.

Perhaps the strangest element in these ballads is the supernatural. In old Teutonic folk-lore the supernatural was solid and tangible. Grendel and his mother are very substantial flesh and blood. In the Scottish literary work from Barbour to the seventeenth century, the supernatural scarcely finds a place. Wyntoun mentions the "weird sisters," but they are not witches, but the three Fates, seen by Macbeth in a dream. There may be allusions to spectres or ghosts, but they give no color to the poetry. These poets live and move upon firm land with substantial men and women; are good Christians and defy the devil and all his works. Blind Harry, it is true, has an exception in the apparition of the dead Fawdoun; but so strange does it seem to the poet that he pauses in his narrative to speculate how such an incredible thing could be.

I strongly suspect that this element came in through Keltic influences. Never, it would seem, was there a people—at least a European people—so other-worldly as the Kelts. Nowhere else was the partition between the worlds so thin, and so many doors of communication ajar. So in these ballads: the spirit walks in; the hero finds himself on the Other Side; the dead revisit the living, and the poet passes from one world to the other, apparently without consciousness of a breach of continuity or need of preparation, as in the old Welsh romances, where the personages were always slipping into the Other World and out again.

Take for example "The Wife of Usher's Well." A mother

sits mourning for her three drowned sons, when suddenly they "come home," crowned with garlands from the trees of Paradise. The mother knows that they are visitants from the dead, yet expresses neither fear nor surprise, but hurries to get supper for them and prepares their bed :—

"Blow up the fire, my maidens,
Bring water from the well,
For a' my house shall feast this night
Since my three sons are well.

"And she has made to them a bed,
She's made it large and wide,
And she's ta'en her mantle her about,
Sat down at the bed-side."

The *revenants* apparently pass the night in slumber, but at cock-crow one gives notice that it is time to be going, and they take an affectionate leave :—

"Fare ye weel, my mother dear ;
Fareweel to barn and byre ;
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass
That kindles my mother's fire."

The supernatural is only the uncommon. It is never worked up to, and nothing, however strange, is ever explained. It was so, and that is all. In one of the versions of "Thomas the Rymour" the hero and the lady visit the Other World :—

"It was mirk, mirk nicht, there was no stern-licht,
And they waded through red bluid to the knee."

This, if not very old, is in the genuine old spirit. But the modern reviser thinks he ought to explain how the blood got there, and he adds,—

"For a' the bluid that's shed on earth
Rins through the springs of that countrie,"—

and there we catch him.

In "Tam Lin" Janet goes out at night to meet her elfin lover—

"Betwixt the hours of twelve and ane
A north wind tore the bent."

Professor Veitch pitches upon these lines as exemplifying the truth to nature which he labors to prove characteristic of these

ballads. He cries out, "A north wind tore the bent! Truer, finer, poetical line than this was never written. It expresses perfectly the feeling," etc. Yet nowhere is there a more palpably modern interpolation. "It expresses perfectly the feeling" of a modern poet who is working up to his great point, and getting his readers up to the proper eerie state. He is writing for readers like Professor Veitch to say "how poetical!" The genuine balladist says, "The north wind blew," which is all that hearers familiar with north winds need. Indeed, Professor Veitch picks out to support his thesis almost invariably those artistic touches which are palpably modern; such things as would not have come into the mind of an older balladist with his eye on the concrete fact.

The fact is, these old ballads show little or no trace of the modern nature-feeling. The poets do not seem to have looked closely or with any interest at nature. Their color-sense is weak. Of course the birch is green and the broom-flower yellow; the rock brown and the water wan; but beyond these conventionalities which a blind man might use, they seem to have taken no notice. They addressed a public that took no notice: a public to whom sunrise meant the time to get up, and sunset the time to go home, and a storm the time to get into some shelter. In summer the leaves were green and the birds sang; in winter the ground was covered with snow, and the wind was cold: so far they could carry their hearers with them. Amiens' song,—

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind,"

would have found, so far, a responsive echo with such an audience, but when he added,—

"Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude,"

he would have left them stranded on the shore of incomprehension.

Side by side with the imperviousness to nature's beauties, is the estimate of beauty in man or woman. Many of these ballads deal with love, and we should naturally expect descriptions of fair women. We have them, but they are hardly more than

conventional phrases, such as a blind man might use. In fact, it has struck me more than once or twice that a good part of these ballads may have been composed by blind men, which would account for much. No peculiar or individual charms are described. The blonde is the favorite type. Princess or peasant lass, it is the same: her skin is as white as milk or lilies, or perhaps snow; her hair is long and yellow or golden; she has long, slender white fingers. If there is a contrast, the lady whom the poet does not favor has black hair and a dark complexion. The above-mentioned, with the addition of a slender waist—usually mentioned in connection with a girdle: “she clasps it on her middle sma,” or “jimp,”—and a blue or gray eye, with a preference for the gray, with (but not often) red lips, complete the balladist’s inventory of female charms. Ladies’ accomplishments are usually singing, and sometimes playing on the harp.

The balladist’s mode of handling his subject is peculiar. The literary narrative form usually has a regular beginning, explaining time, circumstances, and persons. The ballad, without preparation, strikes right into the action. The opening words are often spoken by one of the personages, as in the dramas. “Burd Ellen” begins with a speech of the heroine:—

“The corn is turning ripe, Lord John,
The nuts are growing fou’,
An ye are boun for your ain countrie,
Fain wad I gae wi’ you.”

“The Gay Goshawk” opens with the speech of a lover to his falcon:—

“O well is me, my gay goshawk,
That ye can speak an’ flee,
For you can carry a love-letter
To my true love from me.”

“Sir Patrick Spens” begins:—

“The King sits in Dunfermline toun
Drinking the blude-red wine:
O whaur can I get a skeely skipper
To sail this ship of mine?”

So the grim ballad which Percy names "Edward," begins really after the tragic action (though the original beginning may be wanting):—

"Why does your brand sae drip wi' bluid?"

Or the poem begins directly with the action:—

"Sir Roland cam to his ain luve's bower"—

"True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank"—

"Jellon Graeme sat in Silverwood ;
He sharped his broadsword lang."

So there are often gaps in the narratives which require filling in. Motherwell has explained this from the practice of old reciters whom he had heard. They began with a short explanation in prose of the circumstances, and then chanted the poetry. Now and then they would stop to explain intermediate circumstances, and then take up the chant again. The song was the *textus receptus* for the dramatic or affecting part, and the filling-in was left to the reciter.

Again, the absence of images and similes is a remarkable characteristic of the genuine ballads. A few stereotyped phrases do all the work: hair is yellow as gold; wine is blood-red; lips (rarely mentioned) are like roses or cherries; skins white as milk or snow. A man's hair is sometimes black as jet; an old man's white as snow; angry eyes sometimes burn like coals. These similes are pretty nearly all. It may be questioned whether this absence is due to the poet's wish to tell his story swiftly and dramatically, or to lack of fancy or to insensitiveness to outside nature, or to—what I have suggested as a possibility—the fact that these ballads are, in large part, the compositions of blind men. There might be a good deal said on this point; but I pass it over.

Another peculiarity which is absent from the literary work, and which seems to me of Keltic origin, is a fantastic partiality for the number three. People "laugh loud laughters three," or ride three miles, or sail three leagues before something happens. The harper in the "Twa Sisters" plays three tunes; the Wife of Usher's Well has three sons; horns give three blasts; gifts are of three kinds; two failures usually precede a third and successful attempt; three operations or three kisses are

necessary to dissolve an enchantment. Three blows kill a man: the first staggers him, the second brings him to his knees, and the third finishes him. Hearts, when they break, usually burst into three pieces. I suspect the peculiar passion of the Keltic races for the number three, to have been the origin of a fashion which does not appear in the literary work of the Scots. But in some cases three may have been chosen as a medium between parsimony and prodigality. To kill a man with one blow is slight and perfunctory: repeated manglings would be tedious.

Seven also is a favorite number, as seven brothers or sisters, seven years of travel, absence, or penance. It gives concreteness to prolonged time, and definiteness to statement. "He lay several years in prison" is altogether unsatisfactory: "seven years" shows full knowledge of the facts. Seven, however, is but a poor second as compared with three.

Other formulas seem to be the stock in trade of the balladists. When a letter is read containing agitating news, the reader at the first line laughs "a loud laugh," or "loud laughs three;" at the second "the saut tear blinds his ee;" while at the third, if he gets so far, "a word he couldna see." The lover who seeks nocturnal admission to his lady's bower, usually pleads that "the rain falls on my yellow hair." It would be wearisome to catalogue these formulas. They emphasize what I have said of the lack of individuality in the authorship. One of two things: either the composer felt that he must tell his story in the way and with the phrases which his audience was used to and expected, or, in the levelling process which normalized them, these formulas were inserted.

Moreover, the recurrence of formulas relieved the reciter's memory. Given a broadsword combat or the reading of a letter, he knew just what to say. In the same way, when there is a chance for repetition, as of the words of a message, or the answering of a question, it is instantly seized. Sir Patrick Spens asks:—

"O whaur will I get a good sailor
 To tak my helm in hand
 Till I get up to the tall top mast
 To see gif I can spy land"—

and one of the crew answers :—

“O here am I, a sailor gude,
To tak the helm in hand,
Till you gae up to the tall top mast,
But I fear you'll ne'er spy land.”

Certain typical personages or animals are also among the stock properties. An engaging one is the “little foot-page,” who carries messages for his master or mistress; sometimes love-messages or warnings, sometimes appeals for help. He is, I believe, always faithful: nothing stays him; he runs with speed, swims rivers, and climbs or leaps walls. He always gets there.

The porter at the gate is a reminiscence of the old chivalry romances, where he is a conspicuous figure. He is of a surly, arrogant character, and generally figures as “the proud porter” who opposes the entrance of the hero or his messenger. Sometimes he is bribed or circumvented; at other times beaten or otherwise mishandled. I do not remember a case where he is mentioned with favor, and he evidently was not a popular personage.

The wandering beggar is a more sympathetic figure among these stock figures. He is usually a sturdy fellow with staff and patched cloak, who gains admission everywhere, carries messages, and learns what is going on. Sometimes he is the hero in disguise, as he was in the old thirteenth century romance of *Kyng Horn*.

Horses and dogs of course are frequent. Of auxiliary birds the most common is the “gay goshawk.”

With regard to these types, as well as to the stock phrases and formulas, we must remember that popular audiences were highly conservative. Not only did they not object to hearing the same phrases in a score of ballads, but they expected them. This was the orthodox thing, and what they were used to. So we may well believe that a poet who composed a new ballad would take care to sprinkle some of the old formulas to give it the proper flavor. Doubtless, also, they served to help the reciter's memory, or give him time for improvisation. While he was chanting, quite mechanically,—

“What news, what news, my little foot-page,
What news do you bring to me?”—

he could be getting into shape the sequence,—

“O lady I bring you the sairest news
Was ever tauld in the north countrie.”

A feature of some ballads, in which, however, they yield to the songs, is the refrain, a set of words repeated at some definite place in the stanza. It is a device perhaps as old as poetry itself, and was probably due to the pleasure the hearers felt in being able to join in the song; but was taken over as a literary device, and applied to poems not intended to be sung. In the popular song it was called the “burden,” a term applied to the bass part of a part-song. It belongs more especially to the song, and I shall treat it but slightly.

These refrains we may classify as—

1. The integral refrain;
2. The irrelevant refrain;
3. The unmeaning refrain.

The integral refrain forms, grammatically and lyrically, part of the stanza to which it is appended, as in “The Banks of Fordie,” the happenings recited all occurred

“On the bonnie banks of Fordie.”

In various cavalier songs each stanza recites the good things that will happen, “When the King enjoys his own again.”

The irrelevant refrain has no apparent connection with the story to which it is attached. Thus in “The Carl of Killyburnbraes”:—

“There lived a carl in Killyburnbraes
(Hey, and the rue grows bonnie wi’ thyme)
And he had a wife was the plague of his days
(And the thyme it is withered, the rue is in prime).”

So in “The Twa Sisters”:—

“There was twa sisters in a bour
(Edinburgh, Edinburgh)
There was twa sisters in a bour
(Stirling for ay)
There was twa sisters in a bour,
There cam’ a knicht to be their wooer;
(Bonnie Saint Johnstoun stands upon Tay).”

I have not found examples of this irrelevant refrain in very ancient Scottish poetry. These may have been integral refrains to other poems, and transferred.

The Welsh, who were audacious experimenters in verse-forms, may have invented this odd device. In a Welsh poem (whether ancient or not, I am not competent to judge) we have a dialogue between Gwalchmai (Gawayn) and Tristan, of which here are two stanzas:—

“Tristan of excellent qualities,
The rain wets a hundred oaks:
Come with me to see thy friend.

Gwalchmai of courteous replies,
The rain wets a hundred furrows:
Whither thou wilt I will go.”

The irrelevant refrain sometimes asserts itself as an independent chorus, repeated after each stanza, as in “Captain Car”:

“It befell at Martinmas
When weather waxed colde,
Captain Car said to his men,
We must go take a holde.

Sike, sike, and too-too sike,
And sike and like to dee:
The sikest nicht that e'er I abode—
Gude Lord hae mercy on me!”

The unmeaning refrain consists of words or syllables which, in their present form at least, convey no meaning whatever; such as, “with a hey lillelu”, “doun dirry doun”, etc. There are also refrains which have the delusive appearance of a meaning, as:—

“Jenifer gentle and rosemarie;
The doo flies over the mulberry tree.”

Both species are combined in the refrain to “Earl Brand”:

“O did ye e'er hear o' brave Earl Bran'?
(Ay lally, O lilly lally)
He courted the King's daughter of fair Englan'
(A' in the nicht sae early).”

The refrain, in general, arose from the pleasure which the audience had in joining in the song. If the audience did not know the song, the singer could give them a set of easily re-

membered syllables or words, which they could sing in the appropriate places. They might sing in unison, but very often they would sing in parts. Part-singing was a widely diffused accomplishment in rural England and Scotland in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The clowns at the "Turnament of Totenham" sing six-part songs. The shepherds in the *Complaynt of Scotland* sing songs and ballads in part-harmony of a very scientific sort.

The integral refrain was, no doubt, first sung by the singer, and then caught up by the audience. But if the song went to a familiar tune, the singer might let them sing a chorus that they were used to, and in this way would arise the irrelevant refrain. Thus the refrain "The broom blooms bonnie" seems to have originally belonged to a ballad about the parting of two lovers; but it has been tacked to an entirely different text in "Leesome Brand":—

"There is a feast in your father's house,
 (The broom blooms bonnie and says it is fair)
 It becomes you and me to be very douce,
 (And we'll never gang up to the broom nae mair)."

Of the meaningless refrain there are three suggested explanations. One is that it is merely a group of syllables that lend themselves easily to singing and require no memorizing, like *fa, la, la*, or the *lon, lon, laridon*, or *miroton, miroton, mirotaine* of French songs. But some do not seem to be of this kind; and it may be that they were once integral refrains, and that when dissociated from the original text they lost their meaning and broke down, in the course of time, into meaningless sounds. Or they may have been Gaelic or Welsh refrains borrowed with the tune, and corrupted beyond recognition.

The metre of the old ballads is what we should expect: stanzas of very simple form, usually quatrains of alternate eight and six syllables, or of eight and eight. The rhymes usually occur at the end of the second and fourth lines. We have also the couplet form, but this is often grouped into stanzas by the refrain. The metre is often very loose, sometimes as loose as that of the old alliterative line. If there were four stresses on the

down-beats of the rhythm, the other syllables might take care of themselves. For instance:—

“It’s I, Jamie Telfer o’ the fair Dodhead;
 A harried man I think I be:
 The Captain o’ Bewcastle has driven my gear;
 For God’s sake rise and succour me!”

The Scottish ballad is a vanished type. The environment in which it arose, the poets who composed it, the audiences who listened to it are gone never to return. Horizons have widened: clan feuds and border forays are things of the past. Eskdale no longer harries Cumberland, but competes with it in Carlisle market. Passions still exist, but they find less primitive expression. Quarrels are not fought out on the heath, but in the law-courts: the wronged husband does not whet his sword, like Jellon Graeme, but applies for a divorce. Nor would it have the same auditory to appeal to. The diffusion of education and ubiquity of books and journals have widened men’s outlook and offer a better relaxation from the monotony of the day’s work. And the ballad composer no longer exists. The poet now reads and cultivates his mind. The old balladist had intense imagination to realize a situation, but he had no fancy. He saw things as he believed they happened: similes and allusions did not crowd upon him.

When Romanticism was at flood tide, many poets tried to revive the ballad, of whom none brought more genius to the task than Rossetti. His “Sister Helen” and “King’s Tragedy” are powerful and noble poems on subjects eminently suited for ballad treatment. But the literary touch is everywhere. Could any old balladist have written

“... Love’s storm-cloud is the shadow of Hate
 When the tempest waves of a troubled State
 Are breaking against a throne”;

or

“In all that his soul sees there am I”—?

No; the ballad is a vanished type. It can no more be revived than can the conditions that produced it; but scholars may study these relics of the past as palæontologists study the fossil remains of creatures once full of life and tempestuous energy.

WM. HAND BROWNE.

Johns Hopkins University.