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The Popular Ballad and Oral Tradition

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I begin with a representative quotation from volume 2 of the Papers of Francis James Child because it offers an ideal avenue into the study of the popular ballad and some of the premises of that study: “These two ballads & a fragment of a third were repeated from memory by my grandmother, who is over ninety years old. She learned them orally & has no recollection of their being printed” (II:229). Such a formulation suggests that popular ballads to be authentic and true are held in memory, are unpublished, are learned orally; they are possessions of the past and we get glimpses of that past largely through the memories of the old. It is an easy move from these assertions to suggest that the ballads belong, certainly originated, in the past, in an oral society, homogeneous and small; what we now have is but a pale reflection of their original glory; their time is past.

Formulations like the above, once a staple of scholarship and not totally discarded today, have tended to freeze the ballad, even to limit it to exemplars that might fit a definition implicitly allied to origins and transmission. And this has meant in large measure that the popular ballad is a Child ballad, separated off from lesser types circulating orally, as well as from broadside materials (early and late), literary appropriations, imitations, and other cultural uses. For by the “classic” criteria, these latter are not authentic; to tell the truth, applying the criteria strictly would eliminate many of the ballads in the Child collection.

Yet the ballad is more genus than genre, more cultural resource and generating concept than a single style of popular verse. It has existed in the past and will exist in the future. And it has always found a home in all the available media, adopting different styles appropriate to a particular cultural moment. At once occasional and historical, it may mark a moment at the time or through reflection. And only sometimes will it be transmitted orally; but even so it can be a ballad.

Most twenty-first-century inhabitants of the Western world will know their ballads in electronic or printed form, the one a technological orality, the other the medium of the academy and the visually oriented. This situation suggests that cultural change may well have extraordinary effect on this

genus, this thing designated “ballad”; and societal position may also well effect how one learns/holds in memory/and transmits.

The concept of oral tradition has had a profound influence on the study of the popular ballad, allowing some exemplars to be valorized, others dismissed as inauthentic, and an ongoing and even vital vernacular, narrative verse tradition all but ignored because it lacks purity, defined in a limited way as oral, old. The lived perimeters of the ballad are broad and allow the oral memory beside the book analysis, the poets’ reformulation, and the musicians’ borrowing.

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References

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