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Thomas Percy: The Dilemma of a Scholar-Cleric

Bertram H. Davis

"I bestow upon a few old poems," Thomas Percy wrote to David Dalrymple on 25 January 1763, "those idle moments, which some of my grave brethren pass away over a sober game at whist."¹ How Dalrymple reacted to Percy's analogy is not known, but the modern reader is likely to dismiss it as a facetious if not wholly insincere depreciation of Percy's own efforts, which were pointing toward the publication of England's most influential anthology, the three-volume *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Percy's "idle moments" filled up much more than the odd hours and occasional evenings his comment would suggest: mornings and afternoons in the British Museum, for example; eleven days at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where Percy transcribed ballads from the Samuel Pepys collection of black letter broadsides; and important literary correspondences with poets and scholars like William Shenstone, Richard Farmer, Thomas Warton, Evan Evans, and David Dalrymple himself. Percy's course of reading and inquiry for the *Reliques* overshadowed not merely his numerous literary efforts of the decade, but his work as vicar of Easton Maudit in rural Northamptonshire and rector of nearby Wilby as well. Grave or frivolous, a clergyman with the devotion to whist that Percy displayed for old poems would have provided gossip not just for his immediate circle but for an entire diocese.

Percy's statement to Dalrymple antedated the publication of the *Reliques* by two years, and, as a stimulus for their ballad discussions, perhaps it had the appeal of disarming innocence. Percy was something of a novice in this field, and he was eager to benefit from the knowledge and taste of experienced and reputable scholars. As his great work took shape, however, one might expect that he would no longer have found reason to treat it so cavalierly. But Percy never changed in his self-assessment, even as he himself became the scholar of experience and reputation. Fifteen years later he employed an almost identical analogy in a letter to the young Scottish editor John Pinkerton: "I have commonly taken up these trifles, as other grave men have done cards, to unbend and amuse

R E L I Q U E S
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A N C I E N T E N G L I S H P O E T R Y :

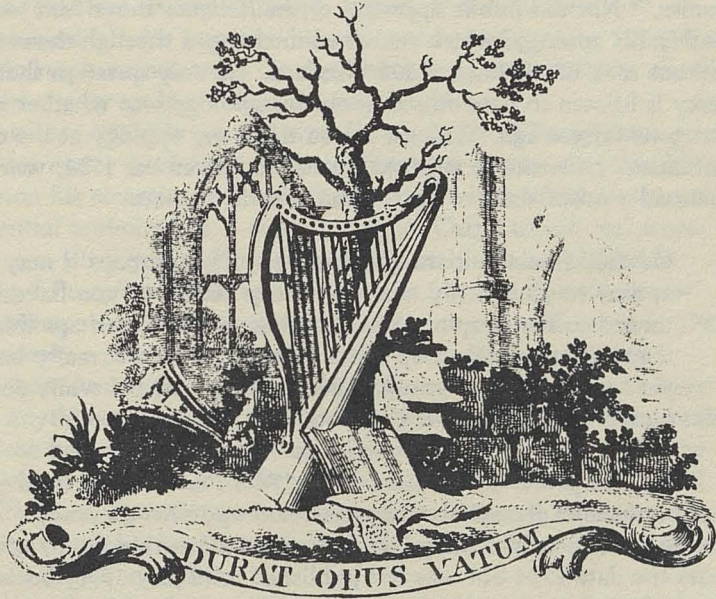
C O N S I S T I N G O F

Old Heroic BALLADS, SONGS, and other
PIECES of our earlier POETS,

(Chiefly of the LYRIC kind.)

Together with some few of later Date.

VOLUME THE FIRST.



L O N D O N :

Printed for J. DODSLEY in Pall-Mall.

M DCC LXV.

the mind when fatigued with graver studies."² Nor was "trifles" the worst of his disparagement. In 1765, when he sent an advance copy to Thomas Birch, he described the *Reliques* as a "strange collection of trash."³ And in other private correspondence, he shrugged off his efforts variously as "the amusement of idle hours," "the Sins and Follies of my Youth," and the "pleasurable amusements of my younger years."⁴ In 1785, he informed his publisher, James Dodsley, who had inquired if Percy was contemplating a fourth edition, that he was quite "indifferent" about the prospects of further publication and would be glad to have the *Reliques* forgotten "among the other Levities & Vanities" of his youth.⁵

In print, Percy was no more generous in appraising the *Reliques*. He apologized in the Preface to the first edition for having "bestowed . . . attention on a parcel of OLD BALLADS," and observed that preparing the work for the press "has been the amusement of now and then a vacant hour amid the leisure and retirement of rural life, and hath only served as a relaxation from graver studies."⁶ Nor did public approval of the *Reliques* move him to modify his apology, which remained unchanged through the revised editions of 1767, 1775, and 1795. Indeed, the only question that Percy is known to have raised about his apology was whether it had gone far enough. "Tell me if you think my apology at the end sufficient," he wrote to Richard Farmer in November 1764, when he enclosed a proof sheet of his Preface and dedication:

Or shall I belabour the point more.—Tho' perhaps it may appear to you hardly true; for as my Letters to you have turned so much upon ballad-making, you will perhaps think the subject has taken up more of my time than it really has: yet I assure you, if you had been with me all the while you would have attested the truth of it.⁷

For all his professed indifference in 1785, Percy, stung by the sharp attacks of the scholar Joseph Ritson upon his accuracy, editorial practice, and integrity, authorized a fourth edition, which bears the date 1794 but was not published until July 1795. Such a change of heart, according to an "Advertisement" at the front of the fourth edition, resulted from the "importunity" of Percy's friends, "to which he at last yielded." But, the Advertisement implied, Percy had not himself returned in the role of editor. Instead, he had "accepted the humble offer of an Editor in a

Nephew,"⁸ whose name was also Thomas Percy.

It is impossible to take this last statement as it seems to have been intended. Percy's nephew, a precocious poet who had published *Verses on the Death of Dr. Samuel Johnson* when he was fifteen, was, to be sure, a fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, and after the death of Percy's son in 1783 he became Percy's announced candidate to edit a much talked about fourth volume of the *Reliques*. But he was an unsettled young man who barely escaped a suit by the parishioners of his first church, at Grays in Essex, and who chafed throughout the period he served as rector of Maralin in Percy's own diocese in Northern Ireland, where Percy had moved in 1783 following his appointment as Bishop of Dromore. Tom's "Tastes and Pursuits," Percy wrote to his wife on 17 September 1797, "are so different from Mine."⁹ The young man of such different tastes and pursuits seems to have been paid handsomely for whatever services he performed for the fourth edition, but we may be sure that they did not include editing this crucial response to the relentless attacks of Joseph Ritson. It was "most unfortunate," Percy wrote to his nephew on 20 February 1798, that the Shakespearean scholar George Steevens "got out of you, that you were only an Umbra" in the fourth edition.¹⁰

This was certainly an odd way for a scholar of Percy's stature to treat his major work, and it is not surprising that readers would question his sincerity in dismissing England's best loved and most influential anthology as a mere "parcel of OLD BALLADS" or, worse still, as a "strange collection of trash." Surely one is justified in asking if Percy's work of revision for the fourth edition does not demonstrate convincingly that his expression of indifference in 1785 was simply a pose, not intended to be taken seriously by his publisher. And could the pretended editorship of his nephew have been anything more than a device which permitted him to maintain the pose before the public, while he himself took up the challenge that Joseph Ritson had thrown out to him? Why in the first place was Percy so anxious to minimize, as in his letter to Farmer, an activity which his friends were not only aware of but stood ready to encourage and assist?

The answers to these and related questions are less obvious than they appear on the surface. They are buried deep in the history of the ballad in England and in the character and experience of Thomas Percy himself. Unlike later scholars, this Shropshire native had not been steeped from his youth in a tradition that honored the

ballad as the genuine expression of the English and Scottish folk, a cultural phenomenon as distinctive in style as it often was in theme. Almost from the dawn of printing, English balladeers had seized the opportunity of quick publication to hawk their penny broadsides on London streets, where up-to-the-minute political satire, court intrigue, and gallows confession became part of the steady ballad fare. Drawn willy nilly into ballad scholarship by his chance discovery of the famous folio manuscript, Percy was quick to try to establish the line between the old and the new. The romantic figure of the minstrel, if not his own creation, embodied his conscious effort to distinguish the ancient "minstrel" ballads from these modern scurrilities, which had brought the very word "ballad" into disrepute. "Ballad," wrote Isaac Watts, as cited in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, "once signified a solemn and sacred song, as well as trivial, when Solomon's Song was called the *ballad of ballads*; but now it is applied to nothing but trifling verse."

The distinction between the folk ballad and the broadside, obscured by the sheer mass of ballad literature, became further obscured as a number of the older poems were themselves published in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century broadsides, and as poems of all kinds were lumped together in hastily compiled collections like the 1658 *Wit Restor'd* and the 1682 *Wit and Drollery*. In the *Reliques* Percy printed both a "minstrel" and a later broadside version of "Chevy Chase," one of the most popular English ballads. He called attention also to a Latin translation of "Chevy Chase" published by Henry Bold in 1685 "By Order of the Bishop of London," a curious exercise in the laying on of episcopal hands.¹¹ In ordering its translation, Bishop Henry Compton may have invested "Chevy Chase" with a new dignity, but the effect of such preferment was to separate the poem still further from its humble origins in English border minstrelsy. Unlike "To drive the deere with hound and horne," "Cane, feras ut abigat" invoked no appealing image of Northumberland's Cheviot Hills. This Latin anomaly lingered on, nonetheless, through at least four reprintings in the first decade of the eighteenth century, until Joseph Addison thrust it into the shadows with his warm appraisal of the English broadside version in Numbers 70 and 74 of *The Spectator*.

Addison had kind words for other old ballads also, specifically "The Children in the Wood" and "The Wanton Wife of Bath,"¹² and partly through the impetus he had given it ancient English balladry

enjoyed a modest revival in the 1720s and 1730s, most notably with the publication of the anonymously edited *A Collection of Old Ballads* from 1723 to 1725 and Elizabeth Cooper's *The Muses Library* in 1737. But the prejudice against the "vulgar" literature held its place among England's educated classes, and Percy had every reason to be mindful of it as he went about the task of preparing the *Reliques* for publication. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reviewer who greeted the book upon its appearance in 1765 no doubt expressed a common attitude: this collection, he wrote, "will please persons that have a taste for genuine poetry, chiefly as an object of curiosity. . . ." ¹³ The *Reliques*, in short, merited consideration as a museum piece rather than as a contribution to English letters.

One could wish that Percy, who clearly admired the poems he had brought together, could have held to his convictions whatever his concern for public reaction. Authors' apologies for their work are not always to be taken at face value. If Percy did indeed wish to dismiss the *Reliques* as a mere "parcel of OLD BALLADS," would he have intruded upon the public's patience to the extent of three volumes and some one thousand pages? One's immediate conclusion is that the answer to the question has to be no. But Percy, one must acknowledge, was never quite certain of himself, and his motives as a result are not easy to determine. He looked constantly for advice and reassurance from the poet William Shenstone, who passed on his assessments of literally hundreds of poems in earlier collections and virtually guided Percy to a format for the *Reliques* which both of them hoped would appeal to readers of taste.

Percy's apology reflects his indecision. For whether or not he intended it, the apology was an instrument for blunting the expected criticism from an audience not partial and perhaps hostile to the ballad, and for encouraging the indulgence that modesty commonly draws to itself. If with this defense the book was still to be condemned, the apology at least freed Percy from a charge of harboring any serious pretensions for it.

II

What has been discussed so far deals primarily with one aspect of Percy's apology in one context: his disparagement of his ballad work in the light of contemporary ballad opinion. But Percy also

observed in his Preface that the *Reliques* was "a relaxation from graver studies," with the unmistakable implication that most of his time was devoted to pursuits of more consequence. Perhaps in 1765 such an observation was not wholly unjustified, even when one considers the extraordinary effort that Percy poured into the *Reliques*. Between 8 March 1759 and 23 March 1761, Percy contracted with the publisher Robert Dodsley for translations of a Chinese novel, *The Song of Solomon*, and a book of runic poetry; for a collection of stories called *The Matrons*; and for the two-volume *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese*.¹⁴ And he actually completed and published each of these works before the *Reliques* appeared on 11 March 1765. In addition, he contracted with Jacob Tonson during the same period to edit the works of Buckingham, Surrey's poems, *The Guardian*, and *The Spectator*. In November 1763, he began the work of translating Henri Mallet's two-volume *L'Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc*, and by mid-1764 his *Key to the New Testament* was at the press.¹⁵ All these, presumably, were intended fruits of his "graver studies," and all had one advantage in common over the ancient English ballads. They had never suffered in the public mind from association with the hawkers of disreputable broadsides.

Percy's diary leaves no room to doubt that, in addition to contracting for these numerous projects, he channeled enormous energies into them. On one day alone—18 May 1761—he read five plays, and by the spring of 1765 he had read more than 175 early Restoration plays in preparing a new key to *The Rehearsal* for his planned edition of Buckingham's works.¹⁶ On 17 May 1764, a day stretched out from four in the morning until midnight, he translated twenty-two pages of Mallet's history, wrote ten letters, and took two rides. "I find you are indefatigable," wrote the Welsh scholar Evan Evans, caught up in the torrent of Percy's interests.¹⁷ Percy's capacity for work, in fact, seems at times to have been almost superhuman, and the reader of his diary comes with relief upon the discovery that even Percy had to interrupt a twenty-hour day with two rides. One may wonder, to be sure, whether a regimen of 175 Restoration plays qualified as "graver" studies, but of course for *The Rehearsal* Percy would have focused upon the exploits of heroic characters like Almanzor and Pizarro rather than the close-quartered tilting of Dorimant, Horner, and their fellow rakes.

It is thus not at all impossible that Percy expressed a sincere conviction when he called his ballad work "a relaxation from

graver studies." A few hours with "Sir Patrick Spence," "The Battle of Otterbourne," or "Sir Cauline" may well have proved restful after an extended engagement with Mallet's French or Drury Lane's heroics: needed diversions, like Percy's two rides on 17 May 1764. Nor is it necessary to assume that Percy intended a false picture of his activities when he assured Richard Farmer in November 1764, that the ballads pre-empted much less of his time than Farmer may have inferred from his letters. In writing to most scholars during this period, Percy alludes to such interests as his projected editions of *The Spectator* and Surrey's poems, but he seldom loses sight of the ballads; they move through the letters like soldiers in review, a virtual procession of title and quotation, text and variant, comment and question. For, far more than his other projects, the ballads required a close attention to detail. Dates, titles, language, word order, spelling—all had to be checked and checked again. And the ballads offered such scattered fields for exploration and study that Percy was compelled to rely upon his correspondences with learned friends in England, Scotland, and Wales if he was not to remain ignorant about much that he considered important. As a result, the letters—at least those of his major literary correspondences—provide a less reliable guide than his diary to the variety of his activities during the years that the *Reliques* was taking shape. The *Reliques* was a major, but by no means an exclusive, literary activity, and doubtless part of its attraction was that it provided Percy with constant new diversions when he grew weary of other work. Percy may have looked upon his "graver" projects as the proper business of a scholar, but the ballads were plainly his delight.

III

Percy's reluctance to give the impression that he took the ballads seriously may have been understandable in 1765, when the ballads were still awaiting general acceptance as literature of a high order, and when his own convictions might still have been shaken by an adverse reaction from readers of taste. But if the reputation of the ballads was the barrier to Percy's unabashed commitment to ballad study, one would expect him to have strengthened his convictions—and revised his Preface—when the barrier was lifted; that is, when the *Reliques* went into second, third, and fourth editions, and when it cleared the way for the ballad collections published between 1769

and 1791 by David Herd, Thomas Evans, John Pinkerton, Joseph Ritson, and Charlotte Brooke. Yet, as has been noted, Percy left his Preface unchanged through the final edition of his lifetime in 1795, and he continued to disparage his ballad work privately as well as publicly. His tendency to dissociate himself from the *Reliques* seems, in fact, to have become increasingly pronounced as he rose in clerical dignity and stature. It was not Thomas Percy, Vicar of Easton Maudit—not even Thomas Percy, Dean of Carlisle—but Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore, who numbered the *Reliques* among the “Sins and Follies” and the “Levities & Vanities” of his youth. And it was the editor of only the fourth edition who invoked a nephew to mask his role in the revision. One wonders nonetheless if, even in his earlier years, Percy ever felt totally at ease in such an unclerical task as editing a parcel of old ballads.

In 1750, when Oxford awarded him the Bachelor’s degree, Percy could hardly have seemed suited for the role of popularizer of the English and Scottish ballads, which had not been part of his Oxford studies. He was not even educated to be a scholar of the ballad, or, for that matter, of Chinese culture and literature, runic poetry, or the antiquities of Northern Europe. He was on his way to becoming a clergyman, and in time a prelate, of the Church of England. For, whatever the attraction of literary studies, Percy’s commitment to the clerical life was to be wholehearted and unshakeable, an outgrowth perhaps from roots that were struck deep in his youth and are still visible.

Among the few remains of Percy’s youthful writings is a sixteen-line “Hymn by T.P. at school,” which Percy himself apparently cared enough about to preserve for his children and grandchildren. In its opening lines the hymn, written sometime before Percy left for Oxford after turning seventeen, lays out in rudimentary fashion the moral course which was to guide him through the years ahead:

Great God! Who rules the Earth & Sky,
In whom all powers of goodness lie,
O! if it be thy sovereign Will,
Keep me from all o’erwhelming Ill,
Teach me the paths of Sin to shun,
From her deluding ways to run.
O! let me not unthinking fall,
But listen to Religion’s call.¹⁸

One cannot, of course, make too much of such a poem. It was a juvenile effort, perhaps the kind of exercise that a schoolmaster might have set for any intelligent youth of Percy's age. But another Percy activity of this period bears a more individual stamp and may thus permit a keener insight into some of his youthful qualities. Before he matriculated at Oxford in July 1746, Percy had assembled and catalogued a library of some 265 books, and in a gesture of fraternal good will he appointed his younger brother Anthony librarian.¹⁹ The library was more heavily weighted in classical and English literature than in religion, but, for a boy of seventeen, it was amazingly rich in all three. As one might expect of a conscientious mid-century schoolboy, the Latin poets, playwrights, and historians were represented in some profusion, along with such English greats as Shakespeare and Milton. But side by side with this traditional gathering stood a later English pantheon: Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, the works of Abraham Cowley, and Gerard Langbaine's *Account of the English Dramatick Poets*; the plays of Dryden, Otway, Southerne, and Congreve; and Aphra Behn's novels, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Pamela*. There were four untitled collections, two each of plays and poems. Germs of specific later interests can be seen in two volumes of "Antiquities," seven sets of Ovid's poems (Percy's choice for subsequent translation), and *The Seven Wise Maisters of Rome*, from which he was to take a story for *The Matrons* of 1762.

For all Percy's tender age, this was a young man's rather than a boy's library. Infrequent items like books of fairies, pirates, highwaymen, "Extraordinary Adventures," "Unparallel'd Varieties," and "Wonderful Prodigies" remained the sole clues to the boy from whom the young man had recently emerged. Clearly by the time he was seventeen Percy's literary tastes and interests had advanced far beyond those of most contemporaries, and it is not surprising that Christ Church, Oxford awarded him a scholarship when he was still "of the third Class from the top" at Newport School.²⁰ But the library, though it contained fewer religious than literary works, was no less remarkable for the intensity of its religious coloration. Such household texts as *The Whole Duty of Man* and *The Practice of Piety* were supplemented with *The New Whole Duty of Man*, *The Devout Soul's Exercise*, *The Practice of the Faithful*, and *A Guide to Heaven*. Perhaps these were simply additions to a young person's standard fare contributed by overzealous parents. But they were

only the beginning. Half a dozen Bibles—in Greek, Latin, and English, the last in both black letter and modern print—suggest an aspiring cleric's rather than a schoolboy's interest, and other books would seem to reflect a curiosity transcending the need to strengthen one's moral and religious fiber through such everyday works as *The Whole Duty of Man* and *The Practice of Piety*. *The Companion to the Altar*, *A Persuasive to the Communion*, *Admonition against Swearing*, *Torments after Death*, *The Principles of Religion*, Burgess's sermons, and *A Reply to the Bishop of Exeter* point as surely to the later vicar, dean, and bishop as Percy's literary collection does to the poet and scholar.

The lines were not direct, of course. They took Percy through four years as an Oxford undergraduate and three as a candidate for the Master's degree, during the last two of which he served as a deacon at the Shropshire churches of Astley Abbots and Tasley, just outside his home town of Bridgnorth. The Dean and Chapter of Christ Church appointed him Vicar of Easton Maudit in October 1753, the year of his Master's degree and his ordination as a priest, but he continued as curate at Astley Abbots and Tasley until April 1756, when he began his long residence at Easton Maudit.

For Percy, these were years of intensive study. In addition to Latin and Greek, he acquired a sufficient knowledge of Hebrew to compose a number of short "dissertations" and, in 1764, to publish a translation of *The Song of Solomon*.²¹ His Biblical studies culminated in the 1766 *Key to the New Testament*, a popular manual frequently reprinted and probably familiar to student and cleric alike.²² His knowledge of French led to his translation of Mallet, published in 1770 in two volumes; his love of Spanish inspired him to attempt an edition of *Don Quixote*, relinquished in time to John Bowle, and to translate Spanish poetry, two examples of which he slipped into the first volume of the *Reliques*.²³ His library grew with him, from the 265 books recorded in 1746 to about 450 at the time of his move from Bridgnorth to Easton Maudit, when he sold or gave away just over half of them, presumably to ease the cost and effort of the move.²⁴ Percy's 1756 list, as could be expected, was richer than the 1746 list in both literature and religion. Three editions of Cervantes made their first appearance in it, along with Buckingham's works and sets of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and *Guardian*. All were to be Percy editorial projects within a few years. New religious works included a collection of eighteen sermons and Brian Hunt's *Parochial Pasturage*.

Hunt's book was a gift, perhaps from a well-wisher as Percy embarked on his clerical career.

IV

Sometime before November 1757—and probably before his move to Easton Maudit in April 1756—occurred the event that was to transform Percy's life: his discovery of the now famous folio manuscript of ballads and romances in the home of his Shropshire friend Humphrey Pitt. "I saw it lying dirty on the floor under a Bureau in y^e Parlour," Percy wrote, "being used by the Maids to light the fires."²⁵ Percy asked for the manuscript and was given it; and on 27 November 1757, he informed the poet William Shenstone, in the opening letter of their correspondence, that he had shown the manuscript to Samuel Johnson and that Johnson had expressed a desire to see it printed.²⁶ Shenstone himself responded enthusiastically, and he continued as Percy's chief advisor on the *Reliques* until his death on 11 February 1763, two years to the day before the *Reliques* was published.

For Percy, editing the *Reliques* required a radical shift in course, and he did not move quickly to turn Shenstone's enthusiasm to account. Perhaps he was simply enjoying Easton Maudit too much. Shortly after his arrival to take up his duties as vicar, he had been appointed chaplain to the young Earl of Sussex, who resided in the parish as lord of the manor. In less than four months the earl also appointed him rector of Wilby, about five miles distant from Easton Maudit. Percy found his work satisfying, but it was not so demanding that he did not have days on end when he was free to do almost exactly as he pleased. Both parishes were small, and the Earl of Sussex proved an easy taskmaster as well as a good friend. Except for a weekly sermon at each church, the calls upon Percy's time were infrequent and irregular: only about once in three weeks did a baptism, wedding, or burial interrupt his contemplation, reading, writing, or relaxation. In the decade between 1761 and 1771, he published ten books, for which much of the groundwork was laid during his Oxford period and the apprentice years of his priesthood.

No groundwork was laid in ancient balladry, however; in this his libraries of 1746 and 1756 were as deficient as the Oxford curriculum. Drawn though he was to writing poetry during his early manhood, his poetry had little in it of the drama and color of

the ancient ballad. It consisted largely of songs and sonnets, many of them mere exercises in gallantry reflecting his pleasure in circles to which a handsome and lively bachelor was a welcome addition. "Flavia," "Delia," and "Mira" were much on his mind, at least until he met Anne Gutteridge, whom he married in April 1759. By contrast with such society verse, the ballads were street urchins, whose company Percy was not likely to seek out on his own initiative. Indeed, it must have been very difficult for him to contemplate, as his first major project, a publication so utterly foreign to the religious and literary studies that had been such an integral part of his existence since his youth.

Perhaps the prospect of trumpeting the deeds of the ancient Percys made it easier for him to yield to Samuel Johnson, who, as Percy wrote to Shenstone on 9 January 1758, "extorted a promise" that Percy would publish "the most valuable pieces" in his manuscript.²⁷ He took great pride in his Percy connection. In 1756 he changed the spelling of his name from Piercy to Percy, and in subsequent years he undertook to demonstrate that his family had descended from a great grandson of the second Earl of Northumberland who had migrated to Worcester in the early sixteenth century. Nonetheless, he must have had serious misgivings about fulfilling his promise to Johnson. "If I regarded only my own satisfaction," he informed Shenstone in the same letter, "I should by no means be eager to render my Collection cheap by publication." But surely Percy had other reasons for his reluctance to publish. No doubt he enjoyed the ownership of poems never before printed and perhaps unique in manuscript; but that was hardly a consideration which could lead logically to the apology of his 1765 Preface. A more likely sequel to it would have been an acknowledgment in the Preface that he felt an obligation to share such treasures with the public. But Percy never reached that point. As most of the manuscript poems, he wrote in the Preface,

are of great simplicity, and seem to have been meerly written for the people, he was long in doubt, whether in the present state of improved literature, they could be deemed worthy the attention of the public. At length the importunity of his friends prevailed, and he could refuse nothing to such judges as the author of the RAMBLER, and the late Mr. SHENSTONE.²⁸

Percy's real reservations grew out of his doubts about the poems

and about the appropriateness of permitting his name to be associated with them, and it was not until the Countess of Northumberland consented to accept the dedication that he abandoned his plan to publish the *Reliques* anonymously.²⁹

Such doubts seem strange to us today, but they were a natural consequence of the ballad's reputation in Percy's time and of his own experience and temperament. The word "ballad," as Isaac Watts noted, had come to suggest only "trifling verse," and Percy's description of the ballads as "trash" and "trifles" merely reflects a common attitude of his day. For his other pioneering efforts—his translations of a Chinese novel, for example, and of Icelandic and Spanish verse—he felt no need to apologize. For all the public knew, each might bring one to the edge of a promising unknown. But the ballad had been so discredited by constant use and abuse that any serious exploration of it could have been dismissed as misguided, if not quite foolhardy, and Percy was not prepared to run such a risk unprotected. The favorable judgments of Johnson, Shenstone, and others were the shield—or, to use Percy's word, amulet—that made his quest possible.³⁰

As for Percy's judgment of the poems, one can hardly accept "trash" and "trifles" as representing a definitive view. Doubtless he expected some contemporaries to apply such words to the ballads, and he was never sufficiently sure of himself to state categorically that they would be wrong. His description of the *Reliques* as a "strange collection of trash" in his 1765 letter to Thomas Birch was probably a concession to the public view which he hoped would not be taken seriously, but perhaps he would not have been surprised if Birch had expressed agreement with it. It is unlikely, however, that Percy ever used such words to Johnson or Shenstone, whose support of his ballad efforts put all admirers of English poetry in their debt. Perhaps he confided to them as he did to poet and fellow antiquary Thomas Warton on 5 May 1765: "Ancient English Poetry will ever be my favorite subject."³¹

Under the circumstances, one cannot criticize Percy very severely for his indecision. He did not have the benefit of an earlier *Reliques*, as Herd, Ritson, and others did when they came to publish their collections. He only dimly perceived the value of his folio manuscript when he first discovered it, and for a time did little but scribble in its margins. Percy had to feel his way, and for him it was by no means an easy way. From his boyhood, literature and religion had captured his mind and heart. But the literature was

not the ephemera of London streets. It was not even the folk strain of the ancient minstrel, the guiding spirit of Percy's work. It was the literature of Greece and Rome and of the latter-day English and continental greats; and this, of course, did not include the ballads, for which Percy found a place only as relaxations from his graver studies of literature and religion.

Ironically, the *Reliques*, more than anything else, was to be responsible for Percy's advancement in the church. Through his new patroness, the Countess of Northumberland, he became chaplain and secretary to the Earl of Northumberland in 1765. The Earl was made Duke of Northumberland the next year; and Percy moved ahead to become chaplain-in-ordinary to George III in 1767, Dean of Carlisle in 1778, and Bishop of Dromore in 1782. Even Mrs. Percy was accorded an honor, though not a clerical one: in 1767 she was appointed wet nurse to the infant Prince Edward, who was to be the father of Queen Victoria. *Bishop* Percy might have been glad, as he stated in 1785, to have the *Reliques* forgotten "among the other Levities & Vanities of his youth," but it had gained him a reputation which he could not escape. On his way to the boat for Ireland in April 1798, for example, he stopped at the Welsh village of Llangollen, where he was introduced to Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, who, as he wrote to his wife on 26 April

have formed to themselves one of the most delightful Hermitages, that ever was . . . & they are more acquainted with all that is going on . . . than any Ladies I have seen in the *Beau Monde*. . . . There was none of the Nonsense I ever published, but what they had all by heart.—And in the most elegant & select Library I ever saw, I c^d not but be flattered to see my GRAND WORKS. . . . In short I had great difficulty to tear myself away from these fair Inchantresses, whose magic spell w^d have chained me there, to the end of time, if I had not broke thro' it with no little Violence to myself.³²

The passage is a revealing one. In spite of his frequent dismissal of the *Reliques*—which in this letter is not singled out as his only "Nonsense"—he can still invoke the spirit of the young ballad editor sallying forth in search of adventure. He has been drawn to a hermitage, where "fair Inchantresses" have woven a spell with

sweet words and a vision of his GRAND WORKS among the most elegant and select company he has ever seen. One can understand Percy's readiness to yield to such enchantment. But even as he recalls his pleasure in submission, he maintains the distance between the Bishop of Dromore and the young Vicar of Easton Maudit with his promise to Samuel Johnson and his countless publishers' contracts to fulfill. "Nonsense" is of a piece with his other terms of disparagement in his later years: "Sins," "Follies," "Levities," and "Vanities"; and it is significant that the word appears in a letter to his wife, whom he could not have deceived in such a matter. To appreciate Percy's meaning, perhaps one need only look back at his boyhood commitment to a religious life and at his forty-five-year ministry, with its overriding obligations, successively, to two parishes, a cathedral, and a diocese. Percy's chosen work was to serve God, and by contrast just about all of his other work must have seemed at times no better than "Nonsense," particularly after he achieved the eminence of a bishopric. Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins recalled his writing to her father "that he had infinitely more pleasure in his success in having obtained from the Government, money to build two churches in his diocese, than he could ever derive from the reception of his 'Reliques.'" ³³ At the same time, there can be no mistaking the note of satisfaction in his mock-heroic elevation of "Nonsense" to "GRAND WORKS." His delight in the praise and display of his books was genuine, and he was obviously pleased to be able to share it with his wife.

Percy was thus consistently of two minds about his ballad work, and what may seem like rank insincerity in his apologies and his self-depreciation is generally no more than a reflection of his doubts. He constantly needed the support of men like Johnson and Shenstone, who, with Richard Farmer, Thomas Warton, David Dalrymple, Thomas Birch, and other men of "learning and character," were linked together in the 1765 Preface to form the "amulet" that would "guard him from every unfavourable censure, for having bestowed any attention on a parcel of OLD BALLADS." ³⁴ He kept the amulet in place through all four editions of the *Reliques*. Perhaps also it was inevitable that his private strictures would become increasingly harsh in his later years, when the decorum of office, as he perceived it, required an almost total dissociation from the *Reliques*, if not from other early work as well. In August 1802, he rebuked Robert Nares, the editor of *The British Critic*, for citing his name in connection with the *Reliques*,

and extracted an assurance that Nares would "take care in future to attend to . . . [his] wishes implicitly on the subject."³⁵

This attitude helps to account for his expression of indifference to James Dodsley about the republishing of the *Reliques*, and for his use of his nephew as an "Umbra" when the fourth edition was actually published. There is no reason to think him insincere in his 1785 letter to Dodsley. It was understandable that the Bishop of Dromore would wish to discontinue his ballad activity and put the *Reliques* behind him. He had discharged his promise to Johnson in 1765 and had seen the *Reliques* through two corrected editions by 1775; and with his new position he wished to avoid even the appearance of a connection about which he had always had misgivings. His decision under the circumstances to undertake a still further revision can be accounted for only by the force of Joseph Ritson's attack upon him in the 1790 *Ancient Songs*, in which the very existence of Percy's folio manuscript was questioned.³⁶ But he might even then have held back had it not been for the "importunity" of his friends and the willingness of a nephew to permit the impression that he, rather than the Bishop of Dromore, was the editor of the new edition.³⁷

The fourth edition, it is interesting to note, was not just the last but also the best of Percy's lifetime. The ballad editor, never totally submerged in the prelate, had gone to work once again with a will and had produced the edition on which scores of subsequent printings were to be based. The book came from the press, of course, still bearing its marks as "a parcel of OLD BALLADS" and "a relaxation from graver studies." For, whatever his fondness for the ballads, Percy never resolved the doubts that had beset him from the beginning.

NOTES

¹*The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes*, ed. A. F. Falconer, Vol. IV of *The Percy Letters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), p. 30.

²*The Literary Correspondence of John Pinkerton*, ed. Dawson Turner (London, 1830), I, 10.

³*Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Bowyer Nichols (London, 1848; rpt. New York: Kraus, 1966), VII, 577.

⁴Letter to J. C. Walker, 10 Sept. 1788 (Fitzwilliam Museum, Perceval K64); Letter to William Jessop, 6 April 1784 (Bodley Ms. Percy c. 1, f.

122); Letter to Walter Scott, 10 Dec. 1800 (National Library of Scotland, Ms. 3874, f. 87).

⁵Harvard bMS Eng 891 (3). The letter to Dodsley is a draft or copy.

⁶*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London, 1765), I, xiv.

⁷*The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Richard Farmer*, ed.

Cleanth Brooks, Vol. II of *The Percy Letters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946), p. 80. Farmer's reply has not been preserved.

⁸*Reliques*, 4th ed. (London, 1794), I, ix.

⁹British Library Add. Ms. 32, 333, f. 197.

¹⁰Bodley Ms. Percy c. 3, ff. 59, 200. Percy, who recalled that his nephew received £160 for his role in the fourth edition, was particularly distressed by the unauthorized disclosure because Steevens (known as "The Asp") promptly passed the information on to Percy's arch-critic Joseph Ritson.

¹¹Henry Bold, *Latine Songs* (London, 1685), p. 80. A full discussion of ballad history is contained in Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

¹²*The Spectator*, Nos. 85 and 247.

¹³*Gentleman's Magazine*, 35, Pt. 1 (1765), p. 180.

¹⁴British Library Add. Ms. 32, 336 [Percy's Diary, Pt. 1], 8 March 1759; 21-23 March 1761.

¹⁵*Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Nichols (London, 1831), VI, 556-61; British Library Add. Mss. 38, 728 (ff. 167-73) and 32, 336 (21 Nov. 1763 and 16 July 1764). Shortly after the *Reliques* was published, Percy also contracted with Tonson to edit the *Tatler*.

¹⁶Northamptonshire Record Office, Box X, 1079 E (S) 1218.

¹⁷*The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*, ed. Aneurin Lewis, Vol. V of *The Percy Letters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 82.

¹⁸I am indebted to Mr. Kenneth Balfour for permission to quote Percy's poem.

¹⁹Bodley Ms. Percy c. 9, ff. 33-42. Percy did not always provide exact titles in either this or the 1756 list, and I have not been able to identify all his books. Burgess's sermons, for example, would seem to be a loose collection of variously published sermons by Daniel Burgess, but I cannot be certain of that identification.

²⁰British Library Add. Ms. 32, 326, f. 25. A useful article largely based on this autobiographical manuscript is J. F. A. Mason, "Bishop Percy's Account of His Own Education," *Notes and Queries*, New Series VI, No. 10 (Nov. 1959), pp. 404-08.

²¹Percy offered his "dissertations" to Ralph Griffiths in 1761 for possible publication in *The Library* (Bodley Ms. Add. c. 89, f. 310).

²²Percy revised it for publication in 1773, 1779, 1792, and 1805.

²³*Reliques* (1765), I, 317-29.

²⁴Bodley Ms. Percy c. 9, ff 2-18.

²⁵*Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, ed. John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall (London: Trübner, 1867; rpt. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968), I, xii.

²⁶*The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and William Shenstone*, ed. Cleanth Brooks, Vol. VII of *The Percy Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 3-4.

²⁷*Correspondence of Thomas Percy and William Shenstone*, p. 9.

²⁸*Reliques* (1765), I, ix.

²⁹*Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Evan Evans*, pp. 102-03.

³⁰*Reliques* (1765), I, xiv.

³¹*The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and Thomas Warton*, ed. M. G. Robinson and Leah Dennis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), p. 114.

³²British Library Add. Ms. 32, 335, f. 5. Because of the mounting rebellion in Ireland, Mrs. Percy had stayed behind in London.

³³Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches and Memoirs* (London, 1822), p. 314. Miss Hawkins's father was Sir John Hawkins, the historian of music and Johnson's executor and biographer.

³⁴*Reliques* (1765), I, xiii-xiv.

³⁵*Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, VII, 599.

³⁶Joseph Ritson, *Ancient Songs, from the Time of King Henry the Third, to the Revolution* (London, 1790), p. xix.

³⁷*Reliques*, 4th ed., I, ix.