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A RECENT THEORY OF BALLAD-MAKING

PROFESSOR GORDON HALL GEROULD'S article entitled "The Making of Ballads"¹ is an attractive essay, written in the fluent and polished manner that we are accustomed to expect from this scholar. It has charm of style, and its positions, taken as a whole, may be termed accepted positions. Because of its literary quality, because it brings together in one paper what has hitherto been stressed in scattered places, and because of its appreciation of the poetical quality of those English and Scottish ballads sought out by the notable collectors of the earlier nineteenth century and made available in the volumes of Professor Child, the paper has real value for the student. That "The Making of Ballads" is a research article, the product of painstaking investigation, Professor Gerould would not, I think, himself maintain. He is a literary theorist in the realm of traditional song, rather than an experienced field worker or a practical folk-lorist. He brings forward little that has novelty for the special scholar. This circumstance would call for no particular comment except for the fact that the paper has been announced as new and subversive—as something independent of old theories. It has been referred to by several scholars as "The Gerould Theory of Ballad Origins." The author himself leads us to expect something revolutionary when he asks us to—

dismiss from our minds, for the time being, our preconceived and well-buttrussed theories as to the narrative lyrics we call ballads; forget, if we can, our arguments; and . . . look at certain . . . indisputable phenomena of the ballad. Oddly enough, though they are perfectly well known, they have been much neglected. Very rarely has their existence been noticed in writings on the ballads, while never, I believe, has their true significance been fully recognized.

In view of the claims made for it, it seems in place to examine the article carefully, to ask what is its content and what are its conclusions. In the first place, what are those overlooked characteristics on which Professor Gerould's argument is to be based?

The author remarks in his opening pages that ballads have a profusion of widely different versions, and that they still cir-

¹ *Mod. Phil.* XXI, 15 ff.

culate in unlettered communities. He believes that the fact of their variation is familiar to all but that the nature of their variation has been passed over in silence. Yet this is the phenomenon, he finds, that throws the clearest light on ballad making. Ballads do degenerate. Oral tradition fails to represent the original without change. There are many versions.

What may legitimately surprise us, however, . . . is the large number of ballads of which more than one excellent version have been brought to light. I beg you who are ballad lovers to consider this phenomenon carefully. . . . The point is that there is the widest discrepancy among what we may call "good" versions of popular ballads; a fact that has never been emphasized, even though you and I have always known it.

Professor Gerould quotes for illustration two stanzas from "The Wife of Usher's Well," the first from Scott, whose texts are always poetical, and the second from Kinloch, also a collector who specialized in good or pleasing texts. He thinks it surprising that the second stanza is independently good, not a distorted reflection of the first. His next step is to ask us to take the several versions of such a ballad as "The Wife of Usher's Well" and try to reconstruct from them a composite original. It will be found that the variants cannot be satisfactorily fitted together. All the pieces cannot be used. A composite cannot be made that will embody everything good without wrecking the narrative structure.

Does this generalization seem novel to Professor Gerould? Probably not. Folk-lorists have long known that it is true in all times and places for any song or bit of folk-lore that had good elements in it in the first place or was handed on by those from whose background of lore it could gain improving incrustations. Anything in folk-tradition takes multiple forms, songs, ballads, carols, dance songs, tales, proverbs—lore of all kinds. Whether they add good or debasing elements depends upon who preserves them and where and at what time they are preserved. That orally transmitted songs assume the color of their surroundings, domesticate themselves in their new environment and accommodate themselves to the background, regional and individual, of their singers has been demonstrated many times for many people and many places.²

² See works like *Jamaican Song and Story*, edited by Walter Jekyl, 1907, Old World songs preserved among the Southwestern cowboys, white songs among the Negroes, etc. An example of an originally "good" piece bequeathing good elements to its progeny is "O Bury Me not in the Deep Deep Sea," from which come the many attractive texts of "O Bury Me not on the Lone Prairie."

We come next to a pivotal paragraph.

Why should these things be? If, on the one hand, a ballad text is nothing but an orally preserved copy of a narrative poem made by some anonymous bard of uncertain date, how can there be in existence several more or less mutually exclusive versions, all of them with merits of their own? Something must be wrong with the theory, for by misquotation merely, fine poetry, it may safely be said, has never been achieved. No: variant texts of differing lengths, in which the same story is told with irreconcilable divergences of incident and phrase, yet finely told, can scarcely be the flotsam of a poetic wreck. Some better explanation must be found.

Professor Child may have had the truth in mind, thinks Professor Gerould, but neither Professor Gummere nor Professor Kittredge nor Professor Frank Sidgwick has given the proper solution. None of these scholars considered sufficiently, he thinks, the phenomena of textual differences. There may be mutually inclusive versions, all having merit as lyrical narratives, but they cannot be put together without scrapping the virtues of the several variants. An "original" cannot be reconstructed from them. Surely this is a safe generalization. There are few or no scholars that would hold of a song in popular tradition, the history of which has been lost, that an authentic original could be reconstructed from its multiple texts. For my own part I am inclined to question how far any of the various scholars mentioned would find the premises or the conclusions of "The Making of Ballads" unfamiliar.

The point is that . . . they [the variations] are inexplicable by anything that requires us to believe in the ballad as a fixed entity and to view the variants as mere corruptions. All versions that have been collected from folk-singers have equal authority, though one may be very noble and one very base. The ballad does not exist . . . except in its variants.

This is well said but not for the first time. The underlying thought may seem new to the author of the article but it does not to others. It has been assumed by most practical collectors of folk-song for many years. Surely Professor Child did not believe that his texts could be pieced together into one authentic original text, of which the variants he gathered were mere corruptions. He may have printed the best or the oldest texts first, but he prints many texts when he has them, and on an equal footing. But whatever Professor Child did or did not believe, Professor

Gerould would have less confidence in the novelty of his positions had he read John Meier's work, printed as far back as 1906.³ The core of his doctrine is:

Als Volkspoesie werden wir daher diejenige Poesie bezeichnen dürfen, die im Munde des Volkes—Volk im weitesten Sinn genommen—lebt, bei der aber das Volk nichts von individuellen Anrechten weiss oder empfindet, und der gegenüber es, jeder einzelne im einzelnen Falle, eine unbedingt autoritäre und herrschende Stellung einnimmt.

He might well have read also the articles of Phillips Barry⁴ in *Modern Language Notes* and in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. In one article Mr. Barry defines a ballad as a "theme" treated in many ways in many texts. Elsewhere he defines a ballad as of "individual creation" plus "communal re-creation." Certainly he does not think of it as a fixed entity. He gives no one text priority over another unless he is comparing chronologically later texts with an original still in existence. For my own part I have never held at any time that orally transmitted texts could be pieced together into an authentic original, nor have I thought of a folk-ballad as a fixed entity. In my *American Ballads and Songs* (1922) I wrote: "Traditional pieces, handed on orally from mouth to mouth, are in a state of flux. They have no standard form but are continually changing. . . . Criteria of *origin* for genuine folk-song have no dependability." Professor Gerould has gone a long way around to arrive at something that most scholars who are not arm-chair theorists but practical collectors would have conceded without discussion.

This explains what, I think, cannot be accounted for in any other way; the amazing variety in ballad texts.

This variety is not amazing to folk-lorists, but is taken for granted. Nothing else is to be expected when there is preservation in popular tradition. The expression "communal re-creation" as over against the old doctrine of "communal creation" has been employed to account for and to describe it, as by Phillips Barry. I have used it in the past to describe the multiplication of texts in

³ *Kunstlied und Volkslied in Deutschland*, Halle, 1906, pp. 12-26, especially p. 14. This work is a reprint, according to its preface, of articles that appeared in 1898.

⁴ "An American Homiletic Ballad," *Modern Language Notes*, 1913; "The Origin of Folk Melodies," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 1910; "The Transmission of Folk-Song," *ibid.*, 1914; "William Carter," *ibid.*, 1912, etc.

folk-transmission. Later I discarded it,⁵ for the reason that the epithet "communal" has no real validity. The oral re-creation of texts is by a succession of individual hands, not by a community. One singer in a community makes one set of changes, another makes another set. The same singer does not always sing a song in the same way or with the same words. There is no community text but many shifting texts in the mouths of many singers. And such refashioning resulting in a variety of texts is not distinctive of ballads, as Professor Gerould seems to imply. It is to be expected of anything that enters into oral tradition. Folk-lorists everywhere have recognized the variety and the "equal authenticity" of such variants.

Let us take the next step, which follows from this quite logically, and let us take it quite without regard to our theories as to ballad origins. If the ballad be considered not as a single text, which has suffered various alterations good and bad, but as a group of versions, collected and uncollected, which have circulated in oral tradition, it becomes clear that any ultimate or original text is not only undiscoverable but comparatively unimportant. In whatever way the ballad originated, that is, it would be submitted to the same processes of remaking, once it came into popular favor. Provided it were in the suitable rhythm, a poem of sophisticated origin might well, it seems to me, have a long history as a ballad, alongside another poem that had sprung crude and simple from the excitement of a rural festival. Both narratives would pass under the same set of influences, would be dominated by the same musical and poetic traditions.

"Grant this"—there is nothing new in conceding it—"and the old quarrel between communalists and individualists seems absurd. Why dispute about the origin of ballads if it is what happens to them in their diffusion that really matters?"⁶ Have we not to do with an instance of *non sequitur* here? Surely it is of value to inquire how songs taken up in popular tradition originated, so long as false ideas of their composition are upheld and repeated, and so long as the ideal of scholarship remains the quest for truth. It is not very long ago that Professor Gerould, terming himself

⁵ "The Term: 'Communal,'" *PMLA*, XXXIX (1924), 440-454.

⁶ Compare my "To most lovers of traditional verse, the source of a song seems a negligible matter. The problem of its origin is of little interest except to the specialist. The fact of popular transmission and the circumstance that generations of singers have contributed to its modification, curtailment, or expansion, lend it attraction." *American Ballads and Songs*, 1922, p. xxiii.

a communalist and a critic of the individualist position, felt that the question of origins *did* matter and pronounced those "fatuous" who did not hold as he did. Both questions have importance for the scholar: first, how folk-songs originate (they originate not in the one "communal" way once assumed for "pure folk-song" but in many ways); and, second, what happens to them after they have started on their course in popular tradition. In a following paragraph Professor Gerould sums up his conclusions.

I fail to see how it is possible to escape the conclusion that in certain regions, long before the beginning of popular education, there developed a tradition of poetic utterance that enhanced the powers common to most illiterate folk and made an extraordinary number of persons capable of putting into noble form such tales as they chose to sing. . . . For a few happy centuries, it appears, the men and women of the countryside lived under such conditions that they could not only preserve in good form but actually improve the stories they sang to traditional melodies. . . . This is no mystical doctrine. There was a tradition of good music and good poetry by which the unlettered peasant was so affected that he did not mar but rather make the ballads that he knew.

A few statements here probably need qualification or modification. For one thing "in certain centuries" and "long before the beginning of popular education" are too vague. The author probably means the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, from which most of the Child texts were recovered. Next, the "powers common to most illiterate folk" are probably mythical. Even primitive peoples have their professional bards. Alexander Keith⁷ states matters more accurately when he writes that folk-songs are usually recovered from a few people with especially good memories. All collectors know that the illiterate have not especial powers. The collector must go to selected people for his best texts. Sometimes it is an unlettered person that has the excellent memory, and sometimes it is a lettered person. In general, during the period when the English and Scottish ballads had the greatest vitality, some singers may have improved the texts that they knew, while others may have marred them, much as folk-singers do at present. James Rankin's garrulous versions of Buchan's ballads may, for all we know, actually have better represented the general popular tendencies in transmitting ballads

⁷ Introduction of Gavin Greig's *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs*. (Publications of the University of Aberdeen, 1925).

than did the versions of special persons on whom the great collectors of the early nineteenth century relied. Professor Gerould would do well to work through the volumes of the Child collection in order to examine what proportion of them can be proved to have come from illiterates. The Child ballads are mainly from manuscripts, from cultivated persons like Mrs. Brown of Falkland, a professor's wife, from Sir Walter Scott, who retouched what he transmitted into poetry, and from the great collectors, who also specialized in the most lyrical texts that they could lay their hands on. Texts from manuscripts are obviously not directly from the illiterate, and the earlier Child texts come necessarily from manuscripts. The later texts are mostly selected texts, the best available, coming often from exceptional persons. The nineteenth century collected and preserved what had special appeal for it, first establishing definite criteria of selection. The twentieth century collects and preserves with a minimum of selection the bad as well as the good, and structureless songs and fragments as well as narrative songs or ballads.

The last pages of "The Making of Ballads" are devoted to a contrast between Appalachian versions of the English and Scottish ballads and the Child versions of earlier date. The degeneration of the American versions is clear. It might be added that there is degeneration also, though in less degree, in Greig's Aberdeenshire versions, from the twentieth century, of the texts of ballads preserved by the great collectors of the nineteenth century. Professor Gerould's final positions are: first, that the ballad as a poem has submitted to processes of moulding under the influence of a definite tradition of music and verse-making, and no sharp division need be drawn among ballads thus formed; and, second, that the day of the best balladry has past. The new ballads cannot equal the old because the tradition of song making has decayed.

In the view of the present writer both positions are valid but not new. The first should be enlarged (though we limit our consideration to English ballads) in order to recognize that there were a number of different traditions moulding ballads of different types, not only within the Child ballads but for ballads that Child's criteria did not let him take into account at all. That no sharp divisions as to origins need be made among ballads is a conception familiar since John Meier. The second generalization, that the day of the best balladry has passed, would be contested by none. It is what Professor Kittredge meant when he said that

“ballad-making is a closed account.” It *is* a closed account for ballads of the Child type. Just as our present stage songs are inferior in poetical quality to the Elizabethan stage songs and our play-party songs of modern origin inferior to those handed down in tradition, so our present popular ballads lack, most of them, the old fine lyrical qualities. Fifteenth and sixteenth century popular song on the text side, not only ballads but pure lyrics, had a special manner that gives it high place. It is trite to point out that Scotch song from the fifteenth century onward had distinct superiority over song of the corresponding types in Southern England. The special attractiveness of Elizabethan song and of Scotch folk-poetry has been emphasized in too many histories of English literature and by too many class-room teachers to need reiteration. In view, then, of the high quality of fifteenth and sixteenth century lyrics when compared to nineteenth and twentieth century popular song, why should any one be surprised at the large number of excellent texts coming out of Scotland and finding preservation in nineteenth-century ballad collections? Would the student of folk-song expect anything else, when looking over the Child volumes, or expect later traditions in popular song to have the same appeal?

I did not feel that I was remarking anything especially new when I wrote in 1914⁸:

To the present writer it seems a mistake to make style standard-giving in a collection of folk-song. There are many who seem to hold as standard-giving the style prevailing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: all songs conforming to these in tone and diction are “genuine”; all others spurious. . . . When we contrast the older and the newer in folk-song it becomes obvious that the superiority for persistence in the popular mouth belongs to the former; nor is this to be wondered at. The older singer composed for the ear; otherwise his work was vain. The newer writes for the eye, both words and music; instead of professional musicians we now have printing. Skill in creating memorable songs is more likely to characterize the first type than the second. Much in modern song is unsingable and unrememberable; no one can expect it to make a deep impression on the popular mind. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries poets, whatever their class, were likely to be singers too. If we approach popular song from the side of musical history, it is clear enough that contributions to folk-song should be especially rich at a time when the

⁸ *Folk-Song of Nebraska and the Central West: a Syllabus*. Publications of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences. 1915.

connection between composition and delivery was very close. In the sixteenth century, song was as nearly universalized as it is likely to be for a long time to come. Some musical proficiency was demanded of nearly everybody, whether belonging to the upper classes or the lower.

Acknowledgment that the period of the English renaissance had the more memorable style in folk-song is not the same thing however as acknowledgment that only such folk-songs as conform to this style are "genuine." The making of popular ballads is not a "closed account," though the making of ballads or songs in the older and more memorable style may be.

Once more, Professor Gerould's paper on "The Making of Ballads" is an excellent essay and it deserves to be read attentively by ballad students. It presents matters that it was well to bring together. But I think it regrettable that he did not take into account the fact that most of the ideas he advances were held by his predecessors. Few, I think, among the leading ballad scholars of the present day would have failed to concede his leading positions before his article was written.

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