The Flowering Thorn

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Introduction

Thomas A McLean

Thou’ll break my heart, thou warbling bird,
That wantons thro’ the flowering thorn:
Thou minds me o’ departed joys,
Departed never to return.

Robert Burns

The flowering thorn expresses the dual nature of the ballad: at once a distinctive expression of European tradition, but also somewhat tricky to approach from a scholarly perspective, requiring a range of disciplines to illuminate its rich composition. Much of this latter quality has to do with the very features that characterize ballads, erzählenden Lieder, or narrative songs. These include an appearance of fragmentation, a wide range of cultural and social referents, complex, evocative symbolic language, and variation.

The notable multiformity of meaning, text, and tune is mirrored in scholarship, too. _The Flowering Thorn_ is therefore wide ranging, with articles written by world authorities from the fields of folklore, history, literature, and ethnology, employing a variety of methodologies—structuralism to functionalism, repertoire studies to geographical explorations of cultural movement and change. The twenty-five selected contributions represent the latest trends in ballad scholarship, embracing the multidisciplinary nature of the field today. The essays have their origins in the 1999 International Ballad Conference of the Kommission für Volksdichtung (KfV), which focused particularly on ballads and social context, performance and repertoire, genre, motif, and classification. The revised, tailored, and expanded essays are divided into five sections—the interpretation of narrative song; structure and motif; context, version, and transmission; regions, reprints, and repertoires; and the mediating collector—offering a range of examples from fifteen different cultures, ten of them drawing on languages other than English, resulting in a series of personal journeys to the heart of one of Europe’s richest, most enduring cultural creations.

While articles are tightly focused on their central themes, they naturally create cross currents that enrich the entire book. Some of these common themes, seen from very different perspectives, include gender issues, collecting and editing as cultural translation, the vigorous life of literary ballads in the oral tradition,
the reemergence of class as a significant aspect of both text and performance, and the long-running dynamic relationship between oral and printed sources. On a fundamental level, though, each article explores the creation of meaning: semantic meaning based on close textual analysis; structural and thematic meaning emerging from study of commonplaces, verse form, and characterization; cultural meaning as embodied in performance and transmission; and meaning as created through the mediations of collection, edition, and translation. To a great extent, the essays collectively address questions of cultural stability, often at the heart of any discussion of tradition, showing the multifaceted, and subjective, nature of meaning, function, and significance in the ballad world. What is it, then, about ballads, some of the “finest specimens of human creativity” (Dundes 1996: xi), that allows such diversity of interpretation?

Ballads—“as hard to define as they are easy to recognize,” in Hodgart’s memorable phrase (1962: 10)—survive through varying fashions and cultural changes, moving back and forth between oral and written traditions, and maintain a fierce existence in the modern world, coming again into bloom when sung (see Bronson 1959–72: ix). In surviving through change, they achieve a kind of cultural stability, a phrase which may, in some ways, be thought of as synonymous with tradition. Paradoxically, if there is one characteristic shared by traditional songs throughout the world, it is variation (see Coffin 1977: 1–19), but variation and change that takes place within a particular, relatively stable framework. While the “popular ballad” may no longer be popular in literal terms, nor in school curricula as frequently as it once was, it remains one of the most intriguing of all artistic expressions.

The narrative song tradition, wrote David Buchan, “gives expression to the cultural preoccupations of—and sometimes the sense of identity of—a given group” (1994: 377), and more than that, as Brendán Ó Madagáin has shown in Ireland, song can function as emotional release “on occasions when feelings were such that ordinary speech was inadequate” (1985: 143). For the Inuit, “songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices” (Rasmussen 1931: 321). In Romanian and Slovenian tradition, an entire world of legend is played out through the medium of these songs (see, for example, Constantinescu in this volume; Ispas 2000; and Kumer 1988). In Germany, songs can combine the real and the historical to yield a rounded vision of human experience (Dittmar 1985: 531; also compare Vargyas 1979; Buchan 1976). In Spain, Mexico, Hungary, and Italy, to name just a few countries with strong traditions, ballads can become
“the substance of social commentaries” (Hay 2000: 159; also Brednich et al. 1979: 44–137). In Portugal, “ballad singing only attains its full intensity at harvest time, when its full power is unleashed in the open air. In this setting, the ballad is quite remarkable and striking since it is sung according to a strictly ritualized timetable, in the heat of work, several times a day, by the whole of the agricultural community” (Caufriez 1995: 253).

These are just a few of the ways that ballads, along with other forms of traditional song, offer us intimate access to culture and individual worldview, enabling a richer understanding of ourselves. Though now subterranean in many European societies, the narrative song tradition, in particular, addresses and relates to universal issues. A look at any daily newspaper will confirm our enduring concern with issues of power, hegemony, and injustice, death and vengeance; cultural identity, and gender rivalries, all themes found in abundance within the ballad tradition.

Regardless of where one stands on “the ballad wars” between the individualists and the communalists, ballads undoubtedly arise, like any other song, from social interaction—family and community contact where song is both the catalyst and the product (McKean 1997a: 97–98, 142–48; also see Glassie 1995: 398–99). Song transmission has, consequently, long been associated with small social units, but where scholars used to consider a song corpus to exist at a community, or even regional, level, it turns out that this body of tradition is really built out of a series of one-to-one relationships between a singer and an interested learner, what might be called “tradition as personal relationship” (McDonald 1997). Such a relationship of song exists between Scottish Traveller Elizabeth Stewart and her late aunt Lucy, from whom she learned her huge repertoire of songs, ranging from music-hall ditties to classic ballads (McKean 2003). She also acquired other skills, of course, such as dealing in secondhand goods, musicianship, and domestic crafts from both Lucy and her mother, Jean. It is well to remember, then, that singers are not exclusively singers but rounded individuals, who also learn a wealth of other cultural information and forms of artistic expression over and above their song traditions. These relationships of cultural acquisition can be contemporaneous, creating a synchronic community of song and singers (a horizontal tradition), or a series of them can link together hierarchically through time, making a diachronic lineage of song (a vertical tradition).

Survivalist, antiquarian, and romantic collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concentrated almost entirely on the vertical tradition and its transmission, inter- rather than intra-generationally (see Bell 1988; and Wilgus
1959: chap. 4). In recent decades, this has changed in two significant ways. First, there has been an expanded exploration and appreciation of the workings of horizontal tradition. And second, perhaps more importantly, it has become accepted that the term oral tradition must be used with care and that it is not exclusively oral. Some traditional songs are recast by literary artists, and, conversely, ballads of literary origin, especially those emerging from the Romantic tradition—that of Bürger, Goethe, and Schiller, for example—are made traditional through oral transmission and memory (see, for example, Marjetka Golež Kaučič’s paper in this volume). There has been a symbiotic relationship between the oral and the print worlds for centuries, with songs moving flexibly back and forth between the two, each doing little harm to the other’s function.⁶

There have probably always been those who are more comfortable with verbal communication and aural memory, while others (since the advent of writing) think in visual, orthographic terms. Where one singer may remember songs through sounds, emotions, and moving images or sequential tableaux, another may actually visualize the words themselves, either with letters, or in the words of the Gaelic bard Máirí ni Lachainn, “A’ feitheamh na bardachd a’ ruith air na glasfhadan” [Awaiting the poetry running atop the walls] (MacInnes 1968: 41).

Some singers think in oral terms, others in nonoral ones;⁷ the two skills, the two patterns of mind, coexist, sometimes within the same person, though one usually takes precedence. It seems likely that in today’s essentially literate, multimedia world of sound bites and three-second jump cuts, orality exists in smaller, shorter units than it did in preliterate times. A song may pass into the oral tradition for more than a generation, or, perhaps, for only a few weeks or months, before the mediation of print, recording, or broadcast lends its own particular effects to the process. This does not negate the importance of orality as an agent of polishing and honing language over time but rather, simply points the way toward a greater complexity, which is surely to be expected from a human cultural product.

The complexity of the aural and written worlds demands that we ask what we really mean by tradition itself. While leaving detailed definition aside (see note 2), I maintain that a peculiarly oral cognitive process can surely coexist with the skills of reading and writing and also within a society that is culturally literate, that is, one under the influence of print but where each individual does not necessarily read or write. Within one person’s tradition, performance, and wider cultural milieu, then, the two traditions graze each other along their entire length, and yet their separate workings are clearly identifiable, as Hamish Henderson
said of ballad Scots, the “flexible formulaic language of the older Scottish folksong” (1990: 82). Orality and literacy are, “at least in such an environment, better considered not as mutually exclusive cultures but as mutually supportive mental habits” (Atkinson 2002: 18).

Elucidating how these two cultures coexist demands wide-ranging contextual study, such as that pursued by the influential Carl von Sydow throughout his work. “Investigators have, to far too great an extent, been content with extracts,” he wrote in 1934, “instead of seeing their information as part of a natural, living whole” (1977: 44). Folklorists embraced the call with alacrity; the seven hundred pages of Henry Glassie’s monumental Passing the Time in Ballymenone (1982), so the story goes, were written as context for two fiddle tunes. Ballad scholars have also taken up the challenge (for example, Bronzini 1981: 84), with contextual and performance information increasingly seen as essential to interpretation. In theory, then, extrapolations from this perspective have a validity unperceived by outside observers immersed in their own aesthetic, using their own cultural vocabulary. The process is essentially one of transforming an outsider observer into a special kind of insider, or, in the context of balladry, part of what Barre Toelken describes as the “performative interaction between people who understand each other” (1995: 33). “By and large we are not studying the accumulated texts of a few educated poets but the dynamic record of a general vernacular capacity to use the poetic power available in the song traditions and in the contexts of everyday life in order to foreground and articulate central features of shared human concern” (Toelken 1986: 50).

Ballad scholars have been fruitfully examining performance traditions even more closely in hopes of illuminating the almost alchemical process whereby a static, rhythmic accretion of words becomes a living song through the addition of melody, a dynamic of performance, and a personalized, internalized emotional expression. According to Scottish singer Jane Turriff,

If you’re no in the mood, ye winna mak a job o’it. I go by the air, the sad air, an it carries me away.... Well ye see, if ye haven’t got the air of the song, you’re nowhere.4 Fin I sing, I pit ma hert intae ma singin. An I get carriet away wi the song.... You’ve got a wey o singin the old songs. An ma granfather wis the same, an ma mother wis the same. She aye took oot the song well. It’s jist like watchin television! Ye jist think that ye’re there an you picture the song in yer hert and ye’re singin.6
As numerous studies have shown, the acquisition of a song repertoire is often not a matter of happenstance; most singers deliberately seek out and learn songs from well-regarded singers of their acquaintance. Most singers also possess a depth of cultural background, personal experience and history, an understanding of the dynamics of tradition, and an acute awareness of technique and style (conscious, unconscious, or both), which inform their performance. Nowhere is Lynwood Montell’s advice to treat people “as a living force” (1970: viii) more justified than when examining ballad traditions, for within their experience, their “hert feelin,” lies the key to understanding texts and meanings and their cultural concerns at the time of performance (Buchan 1994: 378).

But listeners, what Barre Toelken calls the “pro-active ballad audience,” must also have these layers of experience and knowledge to enable them to understand a performance on the terms in which it is presented. “Any traditional listening audience,” writes Toelken, “actively seek[s] out meaning.... Traditional listeners do more than just hear a ballad: they ‘glean’ it” (1999). The interplay engendered through the reciprocal relationship between the text and audience can no longer be perceived as a static entity: when engaging any text the audience becomes embroiled in an interactive game that can be played over and over again. This process takes place with differing results for each individual and for each contact with that specific text. Just as the success of any game depends upon the involvement of the participants, the success of any “reading” of a text depends not only upon that text but upon the audience. Gaps in texts not only provoke but necessitate audience interaction (Neal and Robidoux 1995: 224).

Tradition itself, then, may be said to exist in the ethereal, transient performance space between singer and listener. If this is so, and we add notions of recreation derived from oral-formulaic theory, then we must surely also ask the extent to which the listener recreates the song in the listening, as much as the singer does in the performing. Just how proactive is the ballad audience?

Clearly, the listeners’ range of cultural background, experience of the song tradition, and, indeed, personal experience radically affect their relationship with the song and the singer. Even a passing acquaintance with plot, a few verses, or even fragments enables listeners to fill in lacunae in the sung narrative, extend metaphor and symbolism, feel the implications of the melody line, and engage in many other forms of internalized interpretation. Indeed, in recent years, some scholars have argued that “fragments” do not exist as such and each verse, couplet, line, or even phrase should be considered as a signifying unit in light of its own cultural evocations of meaning, implication, and connotation (see G. Porter 2000; and Porter and Constantine 2003). The song—melody, performance,
and text, of whatever length—combine to involve the listener’s intellectual and emotional armory in the act of conscious or unconscious understanding.

Toelken’s proactive ballad audience and Gerald Porter’s “collaborative role of the listener” (G. Porter 2000: 340) are really, in the end, about homing in on the way meaning is derived from cultural communication, a question which ballad scholarship has fruitfully begun to address over the last decade or so. Reception theory tells us that a text is, in itself, inherently indeterminate in meaning (Atkinson 2002: 8; also see Iser 1974; and Jauss 1974, 1982), but, “for folklorists at least, there is still a constraint upon indeterminacy in ballad texts deriving from the perceived authority of the singer” (Atkinson 2002: 139). Such authority allows the singer, in the Romanian tradition, for example, to “fill the epic schemas...with realistic details that reflected the life experience and the expectations of their listeners” (Constantinescu 2000: 61–62). Singers are loading the dice, so to speak, imposing their own, heavily implied lines of interpretation.

So where exactly does authority lie? Perhaps in the singer’s mind, in the performance, the performance context, in the audience’s, community’s, and fieldworker’s perceptions, or in a recorded or transcribed version that is heard or read, or perhaps in all of these loci, the shared space where these different manifestations of a song intersect. Meaning is best accessed, then, “through the study of relationships” (J. Porter 2000: 367), such as that between text and tune, text and context, or singer and audience. That is not to imply that meaning can ever be deduced absolutely: “the conflict of interpretations is insurmountable and inescapable. Between absolute knowledge and hermeneutics, it is necessary to choose” (Ricoeur 1981: 193). Siding with the latter, then, interpretation takes place anew at each intersection of time, performance, and reception. Meaning, therefore, is as multiform as the ballad and the audience itself (see Toelken 1986).

One of the key places to look for meaning has always been the text itself. Nevertheless, in light of years of contextual and performance analysis, some scholars have seen a need to reaffirm the centrality of the text and textual meaning. D. K. Wilgus, for one, did so thirty years ago (1973). But, as James Porter points out in this volume, Wilgus’s appeal did not exclude other areas of study; he said only that we should “take the songs as a whole, their singers, their performances, their contexts, and yes, also their texts.”

To textualists, “folk songs and ballads do comprise a ‘literature’ of a rather particular kind, from which an approach to ‘meaning’ (in the literary sense) can be teased out” (Atkinson 2002: x; see also Toelken 1995: 29–30). Richard Bauman calls for “a perspective on context from the inside out, using the text itself as the point of departure” (1992: 142). Roger Renwick, in turn, sees this kind of
interpretive work as the only truly empirical foundation to build upon (again, as with his mentor Wilgus, without excluding other fruitful avenues of enquiry):

I urge only that we take as our mission the task of explaining, not “expressive enactments,” not “cultural processes,” but *folksong.* To do so in an effective, convincing, and collective way we must “recenter” our studies in the materials that once gave us great strength but that we self-defeatingly abandoned in an obsessive search for new ideas at the expense of seeking truly to understand our subject matter. (2001: vii; xi–xii)

Textual study works best, it seems, on individual versions, though some generalizations can surely be drawn from families of variants as well. It still has much to tell us about meaning and structure, without doubt, but through the study of repertoire, it also can reveal a great deal about the singers themselves. That said, one must proceed with caution because, after all, a repertoire—bringing us back to contextualism—so strongly reflects the time it was collected, who collected it, and why and how they did so (see Renwick 2001: 142–50, and his article in this anthology; Atkinson 2002: 244–50; Porter and Gower 1995: 269–72, 280–86; also Goldstein 1989).

Thematic study is perhaps the last key area of ballad research to touch upon here. As a tool for accessing ballad structure and meaning, it is largely derivative of the quest for an internationally applicable system of classification.

In 1966, a group of scholars, under the auspices of the Deutsche Volksliedarchiv (DVA) in Freiburg, gathered for a conference, Über Fragen des Typenindex der europäischen Volksballaden [On the Question of a Type Index of European Ballads]. This led to the foundation of the Kommission für Volksdichtung (KfV),


which still runs an annual conference and is the most active working group of the Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF).

The first question was definition, and the one proposed at that first meeting ("eine Geschichte erzählt mit dem Schwerpunkt auf einer dramatischen Konfliktsituation"; see note 3) was soon seen as flawed, notably in the area of religious ballads, "weil ihnen ein wichtiger Bestandteil der eigentlichen Ballads, nämlich die dramatische Konfliktsituation, fehlt" [because an important component of the ballad is missing, namely, the dramatic conflict situation] (Brednich
1973: 11). Scholars soon realized that definitions should be broader to deal with the range of subject matter and approach central to the ballad genre across cultural lines. In the end, “a song that tells a story” is perhaps the simplest, most usable definition (certainly in the context of this introduction).

A universally applicable classification system for the European ballad has proven no more tractable. The first proposal, the ‘Freiburg System,’ emanated from the DVA, home to the earliest plans for a practical type index along the lines of the Aarne-Thompson folktale index (Aarne 1961). 14 A few years later, emerging from seminars at UCLA in the 1970s, the Wilgus-Long proposal concentrated on narrative or thematic units (see Wilgus 1978, 1970). Naturally, each approach has its advantages: The former brings a helpful categorization of related story lines, or song families, the latter allows tracing individual themes through a range of realizations, making functional analysis of a given theme a realistic possibility. Zmaga Kumer, for one, recognized that the two methods were symbiotic and that pursuing both was essential—“das eine tun, das andere nicht lassen” [do the one thing, but not neglect the other], according to the proverb (1976: 51 and see Engle 1985: 143)—but she was keen to emphasize that the main aspiration and method of the ballad researcher must always be “die innere Struktur einer Ballade kennenlernen...aus welchen Bestandteilen und auf welche Weise sie gebaut ist” [to get to know the internal structure of a ballad, how it is constructed, and of what components] (49).

The main emphasis of the KfV has shifted over the years, following (and indeed setting) trends in European and American folklore studies towards contextual and interpretive work. Nevertheless, while a universally applicable system is perhaps unachievable, much good work has advanced our thinking about ballad structure, which has, in turn, fed into periodic reshapings of classification strategies (see Waltz and Engle 2003: frontmatter). The recently developed capability to search an entire database electronically, including metadata, offers obvious advantages over conventional indexes and methods. Such an integrated solution has been doggedly pursued by Robert B. Waltz and David Engle, whose catalog is available online (2003). 15 Now, in the digital age, the creation of usable and useful indexes drawing on type and thematic research is, at last, a realistic possibility.

And what of future research? I end with a perennial question, always asked by those concerned with the future of balladry: “Where are all the young ballad singers?” Equally, we may ask, “Where are all the ballad listeners?,” for ballads,
like other traditional songs, are a communal art form. That is not to side with those who advocate theories of communal composition but rather, to emphasize that song must not only be performed but heard and felt by an audience, yielding transient moments of shared experience and created meaning. Of course, singers often learn, preserve, and enjoy songs entirely for themselves, becoming both performer and audience; I do not mean to imply that these performances do not create meaning as well, though it is a qualitatively different process. In addition, our definition of tradition as a relationship, or as the process of passing on material, relies on communication between at least two people. Within these ideas, and in the complex, multilayered interplay between melody and text, lies the future of ballad studies.

Being an informed ballad listener is a learned art, learned by some in the context of their family, community, or peer group, and by others through actively seeking out today’s performance environments, which can range from intimate family settings to commercial broadcasts. This book holds a key to many aspects of that art; those who read on will glimpse something significant about the flowering thorn. Having been part of such a learning process myself—raised in a singing environment and later taking up another culture’s songs as performer and scholar—I can attest to its value, for within balladry there is complex human emotional interaction, combined with striking imagery polished by use and memory. In balladry you will find artistry, as Hugh MacDiarmid wrote of the little white rose of Scotland, that “smells sharp and sweet—and breaks the heart” (1967: 248).

For Barre Toelken

Notes
2. “Tradition” and “traditional” are used throughout this book in their habitually accepted sense. I certainly agree that only a minority takes part in perpetuating a given tradition (von Sydow 1977: 12, 48), and, while I am cognizant of long-running debates on the “breadth of its semantic extent” (Glassie 1995: 395), tradition is too useful a word to avoid in this context simply because of its many layers of meaning. For just a few of the debates and definitions, see Glassie 1995; Vansina 1985; Cohen 1989; Finnegan 1991; Newall 1987.
3. These three terms are used as equivalents throughout this book; Volksballad (“folk ballad”) is also in common usage. The inaugural meeting of the Kommission für Volksdichtung (KfV) in 1966 defined the genre this way: “Eine Ballade [ist] ein Lied...das eine Geschichte erzählt mit dem Schwerpunkt auf einer dramatischen Konfliktsituation, mit anderen Worten, daß ein zentrales Erzählthema abgehandelt wird” [a ballad is a song
that tells a story, with the main focus on a situation of dramatic conflict, in other words, one that deals centrally with a narrative theme] (Brednich 1973: 11). See Bec 1977 for a treatment of the word “ballade.”

The KfV’s work now includes a wider range of traditional song, but still, for the most part, deals with songs that tell a story. More exact definitions are myriad and problematic, in some cases not transferring internationally with great success, so it is hoped my general, broad usage will be acceptable in this context. Traditional singers themselves generally do not use these terms (Brown 1998: 47–48).

4. There is a long-running controversy over whether individual ballads were the product of communal composition or an individual composer (see Wilgus 1959, chapters 1 and 2).

5. David Atkinson uses the terms transient and transcendental (2002: 248), the second borrowed from Barry McDonald (1997: 58), to represent two ends of a continuum, though I feel these terms lend an extreme air to both types of tradition, evanescence and apotheosis, respectively.

6. For a series of papers discussing the broadside traditions of Slovenia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, see Top and Tielemans 1982. See Atkinson 2002: 18–19 for a discussion of the impact of broadside print on British song tradition. David Buchan also addresses this question for the Scottish context (1972: chapter 18). For the interrelationship between print and oral narrative traditions in Scandinavia, see von Sydow 1977: 37–38; in Scotland and Ireland, see Bruford 1969, part 3. For a general discussion, see Ong 1982.

7. I take “oral” to include the visualization of ballad action and plot while singing, as opposed to the visualization of actual texts, written or printed. For a discussion of visualization in storytelling, see Macdonald 1978. The same phenomenon is generally accepted to take place for many ballad singers; I am currently researching this phenomenon with singers in North East Scotland.

8. Tape SA1973/71 B1 in the School of Scottish Studies Archives, department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, recorded by James Porter and Hamish Henderson. Extracts appear with the School’s kind permission.

9. These Jane Turriff interviews are on tapes 1994.50–51, North East Folklore Archive, Mintlaw, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Transcripts are available on the web at <http://www.nefa.net> (click on the Banff and Buchan Collection). See McKean 1997b: 242 for more along these lines.


11. Like Toelken, I have reservations about the word “proactive,” but I think it is useful in this context.

12. The theory proposes that singers of the south Slavic epics, which sometimes run to many thousand lines, recreate the songs each time using only a remembered skeletal plot structure and a range of formulaic word combinations, phrases, and couplets (see Lord 2000, and Lord 1995: chapter 7). This premise has been applied to European balladry—as distinct, that is, from the south Slavic epic—with widely varying care and success—German: Roth 1977; Cheesman 1994: chapter 3; Spanish: Beatie 1964; Webber 1995; Scandinavian: Holzapfel 1978; Richmond 1963; Anglo-Scottish: Jones 1961; Buchan 1972; Andersen 1985; McCarthy 1990. Albert Friedman has produced several probing, detailed responses to these ideas (1961, and especially 1983).


14. For a thorough example of this type, see Jonsson et al.1978.

15. For applications to German balladry, see Engle 1979. For an exploration of classification problems in the pan-Hispanic tradition, see Hay 1993.
References


Recordings