The Flowering Thorn

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This essay aims simply to highlight some of the difficulties I encountered when trying to assess the range and importance of French traditional balladry, so I will mainly raise questions rather than suggest answers.

The first difficulty lies in the ambiguity of the very term “French ballad.” Does it mean ballad in the French language, or ballad collected in the state of France? These are two very different things, if one bears in mind the particularities of French history and the creation of the French state, really a conglomerate of widely differing cultural and linguistic units. At the end of the French Revolution, when leaders faced the difficulty of turning peasants into Frenchmen, historians reckon that only 15 percent of the population had French as their native language. The rest spoke either distinct languages like Occitan, Catalan, Basque, Breton, Alsatian, Flemish, or mutually incomprehensible dialects of French, such as Poitevin or Champenois. The systematic suppression of regional languages that began during the revolution took more than one hundred years to be enforced so that, until the First World War, the great majority of the common people learned French as a second language when they started school at the age of five. Against this background, what do we make of the many collections of ballads collected and printed in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Jean-François Bladé’s *Chants populaires de la Gascogne*, published in French but collected in the Gascon vernacular, a dialect of Occitan? Are these French ballads or not? In fact, the richest collections of narrative songs made in France come from lower Brittany and from Flanders and are in the Breton and Flemish languages. On the other hand, the greatest bulk of folk songs in the French language, and some of the most balladic of them, have been collected outside France, specifically in French-speaking Canada.

The second difficulty lies in the fact that we have no comprehensive scholarly edition of narrative songs in the French language similar to Svend Grundtvig’s for Denmark (1853–1976) or Francis James Child’s for Britain (1882–98). No matter what theoretical questions these two editions may raise concerning problems of definition and delimitation, there is no denying that they testify to an awareness of the ballad as a specific genre, an awareness which they, undoubtedly, have in turn reinforced. But in France, the only “comprehensive” edition of
narrative songs with scholarly ambitions is Georges Doncieux’s *Le romancero populaire de la France* (1904), which contains forty-five ballad types. This edition, however, in spite of its scholarly ambitions, or rather because of them, is of very limited use in this investigation. Unlike the Grundtvig and Child editions, Doncieux only lists one version of each ballad (type), and he calls this a “version critique,” that is, a reconstruction of what he considers to have been the “original” ballad. Some fifty years after Grundtvig’s groundbreaking manifesto and his challenge to publish “everything there is, and as it is” (1847), Doncieux’s attitude to the ballad still betrays a literary approach, blind to the specificity of oral variants. So, when looking for French ballads, we have to turn to the many regional collections of folk songs, with rather sparse source information, if any, published in the last century. We must look to two national anthologies compiled respectively by Joseph Canteloube (1951) and Henri Davenson (1957), two very learned specialists but who work for the general public. We also have at our disposal the songs submitted in response to the national campaign to collect “national popular poetries” launched in 1854 by the Ministry of Education, under the direction of Jean-Jacques Ampère, which are still mostly unpublished.

Thirdly, there is no unambiguous French term for the ballad, popular nor scholarly, and correspondingly no clear concept of the ballad as a specific subgroup of folk song. The Breton language, on the other hand, distinguishes very clearly between a *gwerz* (a narrative song) and a *sone* (a term that seems to cover all other songs). Even among ballad scholars in France, terminology is confused and confusing. *Ballade*, in reference to narrative folk songs, has sometimes been used by the Romantic poets who, following Gérard de Nerval, did much to make traditional folk songs popular among the educated classes around 1820, but it was never really adopted by French folklorists. It would also have been misleading since in French literary history, the term refers to at least two poetic genres: a medieval poem, mostly lyrical, with an intricate metrical pattern (for example, the *ballades* of Guillaume de Machaut, Charles d’Orléans, and so on), and a nineteenth-century poem with “Gothic” content and vague connotations of exotic populations (for example, Victor Hugo’s *Odes et Ballades*).

French folklorists like Georges Doncieux (1904) and P. Tarbé (1863) have sometimes used the word *romancero*, in imitation of the Spanish, to designate an entire group of ballads, but only a few have adopted the Spanish *romance* to refer to a single ballad. And rightly so, since the word *romance* in French has very different connotations and usually refers to the sentimental songs that became popular among the upper classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
The most usual word for a narrative folk song in French is *complainte*. Julien Tiersot warmly advocates the use of this word when referring to “narrative, epic, legendary and historical songs”:

> Complainte...c’est bien là le nom qui convient aux chansons du sombre moyen-âge. La complainte en effet, dans son acception vraiment populaire, est avant tout un récit: elle est le type de la chanson narrative triste et sérieuse.

[*‘Complainte’: this surely is the accurate term to apply to those songs from the dark middle-Ages. For a complaint, in the genuine folk traditional sense of the term, is first of all a story. It denotes a sad and serious narrative song.]* (Tiersot 1889: 6)

Most folklorists have followed Tiersot’s example, but this is not uncomplicated, for *complainte* is also the most usual word for “broadside sheet,” many of which actually start with the words: “Ecoutez la complainte….” Broadside sheets, as a medium rather than a genre, include some ballads but also literary songs and those about recent, actual events, manufactured for that particular medium. In my experience as a fieldworker, this is exactly how elderly contributors understand the word *complainte*: a song which they have acquired as a *feuille volante*, a “broadsheet,” and which, for exactly that reason, relates “real” events. To add to the terminological confusion, Georges Doncieux uses *complainte* in yet another sense. He calls the forty-five songs included in his *romancéro* both *romances gallo-romaines* and *chansons lyrico-épiques* (referring respectively to their alleged (ancient) age and partly narrative content), but he characterizes each of them as either a *chanson à danser* (those with a burden, whether an independent refrain or just the second line repeated as a refrain) or a *complainte*. In his view, this is the most important distinction among traditional songs. For Doncieux then, the *complainte*, or “song to be told,” is the opposite of the *ballette*, or “song to be danced to,” which, after all, may have links with the original meaning of the word “ballad” (see Bec 1977).

It appears easier to talk about French ballads in English than in French. Indeed, the whole classification of French folk songs in the nineteenth century is confused. Jean-Jacques Ampère, in his official directives for the first national folk-song collecting campaign (1853), classifies them according to heterogeneous criteria, some thematic, some formal, while some have to do with origins and others with social use. When looking for ballads in the six manuscript
volumes subsequently compiled, one must consult each of the following groups: *Légendes, Vies de Saints, Miracles, Poésies populaires d’origine païenne, Poésies historiques, Poésies romanesques, Chants de soldats, Chants de marins*, and *Chansons de circonstance*.

Scholars disagree not only about what to call ballads but also which songs are to be regarded as ballads and which are not. Thus, Doncieux’s *romancero* leaves out “Le meurtre de la mie,” the story of a jealous mother who forces her son to kill his true love and bring back her heart, a song that is balladic in both theme and style. Yet he includes “Les princesses au pommier doux” and “La belle est au jardin d’amour,” which are not narrative at all and, to my mind, can on no account be regarded as ballads, though they do have an initial formula scene which gives them a medieval flavor. Admittedly, Doncieux died before completing the *romancero*, which was published after his death. Had he lived, the book would probably have included more ballads.

If one turns to the most recent and comprehensive catalogue of French-speaking folk songs, that of Conrad Laforte (1958), the search for ballads is not easier, for although this catalogue is very systematic, it is based upon purely formal criteria, put forward in a separate publication (Laforte, 1976). Unfortunately for this methodology, French narrative songs, unlike their Nordic and British counterparts, have no standard form or metrical pattern. Some have refrains, some do not. Some are stanzaic, some are not (at least, according to Laforte). Stanzaic ballads can have four lines, with rhymes *aabb, ccdd*, as in “La fille du Roi Louis”; they can have two lines, with rhymes *aa, bb, cc*, as in “La fiancée infidèle”; they can have three lines, with rhymes *abb, cdd*, as in “Le retour du soldat,” although in performance the first line is probably repeated so that a three-line ballad turns out to be composed of quatrains. They can also have six lines, as in “Le mariage anglais”; the lines themselves vary from four syllables, admittedly very rarely, to sixteen.

Actually, the existence of nonstanzaic ballads as postulated by Laforte (1976) is more problematic, I think. He regards the difference between stanzaic and nonstanzaic songs or songs *en laisse* as the most fundamental distinction in French folk-song poetics. A *laisse* is a series of lines of the same length which end in the same assonance; it was the meter used in the medieval *Chansons de geste*. Laforte rebukes Doncieux, Nerval, and other ballad editors for writing, for example, “Les filles de La Rochelle” as a series of quatrains, where only the second and fourth lines rhyme, followed by a burden:
Ce sont les filles de la Rochelle
Qui ont armé un bâtiment [bis]
Pour aller faire la course
Dedans les mers du Levant
*Ah! La feuille s'envole, s'envole
*Ah! La feuille s'envole au vent*

La grand’voile est en dentelles
La misaine en satin blanc [bis]
Les cordages du navire
Sont de fil d’or et d’argent
*Ah! La feuille s’envole, s’envole
*Ah! La feuille s’envole au vent*

He regards the *laisse* as the primary form since each quatrain makes up a long line with the same ending throughout the song:

Ce sont les filles de La Rochelle qui ont armé un bâtiment
Pour aller faire la course dedans les mers du Levant
La grand’voile est en dentelles la misaine en satin blanc
Les cordages du navire sont de fil d’or et d’argent
L’équipage du navire c’est tout filles de quinze ans
Le cap’taine qui les gouverne est le roi des bons enfants...

Conrad Laforte may well be right in his claim that the *laisse* is the primary form from a generic historical point of view but not a folkloristic one. Folk songs, after all, are primarily oral and aural experiences; the written form must be secondary. In performance, “Les filles de La Rochelle” is, I would claim, very much a stanzaic song. The lines of the *laisse* are coupled two by two, each couplet being followed by a burden, and the second half of the first line of the *laisse* (or, if you like, the second line of the quatrain) is repeated, thus creating a sort of middle burden. Moreover, Laforte’s argument takes no notice of the music, which is certainly stanzaic. I would claim that even the tunes of a ballad like “Les anneaux de Marianson” (whose text, admittedly, is stichic and without burden) are stanzaic. Marius Barbeau, who has heard as well as read the songs, characterizes them as being “toutes dans le style récitatif qui convient aux grands poèmes épiques” [all those ballads are in the chanting style characteristic of epic
poetry] (1962: 135). Each line of the laisse is a musical stanza with a theme, a reversal, and a resolution.

A ballad which could truly be called en laisse would also, in performance, have every line chanted on the same few notes, infinitely repeated, without any melodic development or resolution. This is perhaps the way the Chansons de geste were once chanted (Gérold 1932: 79–90), but it is not the case with the ballads collected in the nineteenth century and during the twentieth in Canada, where the melody as well as the text has been collected. Even if one does not accept Laforte’s distinction between stanzaic and nonstanzaic ballads, the fact remains that narrative songs in French have no standard metrical pattern.

But do French narrative songs display that special “balladic” style or structure so conspicuous in many Scandinavian and Anglo-Scottish ballads and so meticulously analyzed by studies such as David Buchan’s (1972)? Here we must distinguish between the structure of the songs and their use of formula. As I have shown in an earlier essay (1987), there is an extensive use of traditional formulas in French folk songs, both narrative and supranarrative, to use Flemming Andersen’s terminology (1985). But most of these formulas, including the narrative ones, apply to all sorts of folk songs. As for special balladic structure—the intricate uses of binary, trinary, and annular patterns—puzzlingly, though found in French balladry, it is restricted to a very few ballad types, mostly “La porcheronne/La porcelette,” “Le Roi Renaud,” and “Les ecoliers pendus.” You may then think that these are isolated ballads, perhaps borrowed from alien cultural areas, but this is hardly the case. “Le Roi Renaud,” for example, has been collected throughout France in many variants, all very different in diction but most with the same balladic structure. “La porcheronne” has been collected in Lorraine, Provence, and French-speaking France (Nivernais, Poitou, Forez), while “Les ecoliers pendus,” which perhaps tells of a real thirteenth-century episode during the reign of King Saint Louis, has been collected both in Oc- and in Oïl-speaking France, as well as Hainaut (Belgium) and Québec. Apart from these few ballad types of various origin, French narrative songs are quite linear in narrative structure.

The question of the burden is even more puzzling. In Scandinavia, the presence of the burden, repeated after each stanza of two or four lines, is almost part of the definition of the ballad. This raises the question of whether the ballad was originally a dancing song, with the added argument of the possible etymology of the word ballata. And while I do not refute the fact that stanzaic poetry, linked with the emergence of dancing song, may have come from France (possibly
through England with the carol), we must face the fact that in French oral tradition, at least as recorded in the nineteenth century, most rondes or dancing songs are conspicuously nonnarrative: they are lyrical or satirical, with a clear tendency toward the nonsensical. Most narrative songs in French—“La fille du Roi Louis,” “Le Roi Renaud,” “La porcheronne,” “Germaine,” “La blanche biche,” “Les anneaux de Marianson,” “Renaud le tueur de femmes,” “Le prince des Ormeaux”—have no burden and are very ill suited to the rhythm of the French gavotte, the chain dance that fits the rondes.

If we turn to the content of the songs, the picture is also quite muddled. As early as 1939, Entwistle remarked that “the ballad in France is the narrative aspect of lyrical poetry” (1939: 132). Certainly not many of the narrative songs collected in French-speaking France during the nineteenth century contain events as dramatic or epic, nor story lines as elaborate, as the Scandinavian and Scottish ballads or the romances of Spain. Supernatural ballads other than Christian legends are few: “La fille changée en cane,” “La blanche biche.” Significantly, “Le Roi Renaud” has dropped the initial episode of the encounter with the elf girl in France, although it does appear in the Breton versions of that ballad.

Heroic ballads are nonexistent in the French tradition. Strangely enough, the exploits of Charlemagne and his peers, which in the Middle Ages inspired the flourishing epics of the Chansons de geste, have left no trace at all in recorded nineteenth-century folk tradition. There are slight hints of the Crusades in the ballad type “L’escrivette” (Doncieux 1904: 125–43), which tells of a young man’s search for his bride who has been stolen by the Saracens while he was away at war, and possibly in the ballad type “Germaine” (Tiersot 1903: 102–104; cf. Mélusine 2: 45–46; Romania 1: 353; Pineau 1892: 405; Barbeau 1962: 111–28). Some scholars claim that the Crusades also provide a background to “La porcheronne,” in which the heroine’s husband comes home incognito after having been away at war “across the seas” for seven years. The evidence is tenuous; at the very least, France has waged many wars across the seas.

There are very few historical ballads. “La prison du Roy François” tells of François I’s captivity in Italy in 1525, but most of the historical songs published by Leroux de Lincy in his Recueil de chants historiques Français [Collection of Historical French Songs] (1841–42) are of literary origin. Again, apart from a few Christian legends, French narrative songs tell of murderous husbands and, incidentally, of revenge. They describe sea voyages and sea battles, though these appear far more often in contemporary sound recordings than published collections of the nineteenth century. This last is probably due to the fact that in earlier
times fieldwork was carried out more intensively among peasants than seamen. Present-day intensive fieldwork among coastal populations will hopefully alter this distorted picture somewhat.¹

For the most part, then, French narrative songs deal with love stories. It is worth noticing that when they end tragically and are not simply humorous stories of seduction accomplished or avoided (depending on their male or female perspective), it is usually because one of the protagonists is unloving or unfaithful, or perhaps because of the jealousy of a third party. There are not many cases of love hampered by elaborate family feuds or political events, and these songs rarely express the conflict between kin and love that characterize the majority of the knightly ballads of Scandinavia.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by the lack of a French word to designate a ballad. Three types of criteria define a folklore genre: content, form, and social use. When all three criteria merge, they are likely to create a much more self-conscious poetic genre than when only one criterion relates to that genre. The ballad in France, as a genre, seems too diffuse to define rigorously, for it has no specific form or social use. Nevertheless, many scholars have stressed the importance of France in the genesis and dissemination of the ballad. Recently, David Colbert claimed that he has pinpointed the origin of the Scandinavian ballad, narratively very elaborate, in the convergence of three elements of French medieval poetry. The French *rondeau* provided the dancing *ronde* and the burden, the *chansons de toile* supplied the formula scenes, and strophic poetry contributed the stanzaic form (1989). Lajos Vargyas considers France to be the starting point for dissemination throughout Europe of the “international ballad,” the *Volkslied* type with a universal theme, less anchored in a specific social and historical context than the “Scandinavian” ballad (1983).

As I hope I have shown, the combination of elaborate narrative with a specific form (stanzaic poetry with unvarying metrical pattern) and specific poetics (special structure and uses of formulas), so characteristic of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian ballads, rarely appears in the same song in French. In an appendix to *Hungarian Ballads*, Vargyas lists an Index of French Ballad Types, which, on the face of it, seems impressive: 135 ballad types, as compared to the 45 ballads in Doncieux’s *romancero*. Vargyas is certainly well read, and familiar with French folk songs published in books and most of those published in specialized journals; he also lists some of the unpublished material from the Ampère national collection. Nevertheless, close scrutiny of his list reveals some disturbing facts. It contains a number of ballads, which, though published in French, were collected in foreign languages, for example, Bladé’s aforementioned *Chants*
populaires de la Gascogne. Thirty-one of the types exist only in one version and nine in only two versions, and less than one-third of all ballad types have been collected in more than two versions. Moreover, a number of these are hardly narrative at all.

So what are we to conclude? Many French-language traditional songs have been collected, in France and Canada, over the last two centuries, resulting in the publication of many volumes of songs from all the French-speaking regions. These do contain a number of narrative songs, some collected in many variants. Some belong to the international repertoire—“The Diver,” “The Maiden on the Shore,” for example—and yet, as a genre, the ballad in France is diffuse and invisible; it is submerged in the body of other kinds of traditional song. In those that can be found, their content is hardly epic, their narrative extension minimal, and their tone usually lighthearted rather than tragic or serious.

I see at least two possible explanations for this fact. First, there may have been, at some stage, a flourishing balladic tradition in French-speaking France, a tradition of more elaborate plots with narrative structures more specific to orally composed poetry. This tradition has left no trace in earlier written literature, its poetic too alien to literate people and therefore despised. It had already faded away by the second half of the nineteenth century, when the large-scale collecting of folklore began.

Second, alternatively, France has contributed to international balladry only isolated elements: strophic poetry, end rhyme, burden and chain dance, a few formulaic scenes. These elements merged into the ballad genre once they left France, where apposite historical and cultural context could provide specific, elaborate story plots. In that case, if France can be said to be the cradle of the ballad, the baby started to thrive long after leaving the cradle.

Notes
1. See Barbeau 1962, and the series of recordings, Anthologie des Chansons de mer, made by the Chasse-Marée (Douarnenez), an association which also publishes an eponymous review of maritime folklore.

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