

James Porter

Genre, Conflict, Presence:
Traditional Ballads in a Modernizing World

Sigrid Rieuwerts (Ed.)

B • A • S • E

Ballads and Songs – Engagements

Volume 2

James Porter

Editorial Assistant: Sigrid Rieuwerts

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IN MEMORY OF DOUGLAS YOUNG:

POET, POLYMATH, TEACHER, FRIEND

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Nothing can be more appropriate for *Genre – Conflict – Presence* than to have it published in our series B·A·S·E – BALLADS AND SONGS – ENGAGEMENTS at the WVT in Trier. In his study of the genre, James Porter argues for engagements, conflicts and tensions as the hallmarks of ballad form (internal) and ballad communication (external). Instead of offering yet another book on the origin of the genre and its proliferation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he discusses traditional ballads as the locus of conflict on many levels, thereby taking them into the 21st century. It is not the past but the presence that guides his study, the realization of ballad performance in specific, face-to-face contexts.

Thus, *Genre – Conflict – Presence: Traditional Ballads in a Modernizing World*, offers nothing less than a performative turn in ballad studies. Ballads are conceived as a quasi-genre, as traditional texts and tunes taking on their specific *gestalt* in the shared space of singers and audiences. While others have regarded the *performing* or the *presenting* of a ballad as the key to its understanding, Porter goes much further and argues for *presencing*, i.e. for taking the interactive relationship of singer and audience into account. It is the responsive nature of the genre that makes it real and come alive, he argues, drawing on his vast knowledge of ballad theory and his long experience of ballad singing here and across the Atlantic. He knows that no recording, and indeed, no *Sitz-im-Buch* (book setting) or *Sitz-im-Internet* (internet setting) can be a substitute for the real *Sitz-im-Leben* (life setting). The “presence” of ballads is arguably only meaningful when the singer or performer and audience are inter-responsive in a specific physical space that they share.

The transient, dramatic and also magical character of ballads is explained by James Porter in a fascinating way. It is easy to predict that his challenge to read traditional ballads in terms of conflicts and presence is going to become a key text in the history of ballad scholarship – just like volume one of B·A·S·E, namely Emily Lyle's *Fairies and Folk*. With *Genre – Conflict – Presence*, ballad theory has certainly arrived in the 21st century and we are proud to present it as volume two of B·A·S·E – BALLADS AND SONGS – ENGAGEMENTS.

Alte Schule, Zotzenheim

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This book covers a few decades of scholarly work on ballads and the place of this popular genre in the modern world. Accordingly, some of the chapters, though they have appeared elsewhere and summarize the status of ballads in earlier decades, have been updated to fit into the general scheme of the volume, namely as a study of traditional ballads and their role in the twentieth century. The Prologue, Introduction, Chapters One and Two, and the “Interlude” on “Edward” are newly written; Chapter Three originally appeared in *Western Folklore* 45 (1986), 110-25 as “Ballad Explanations, Ballad Reality, and the Singer’s Epistemics”; Chapter Four is the elaborated text of an invited lecture given at Harvard University in October 1993; Chapter Five is a revised version of “Muddying the Crystal Spring: From Idealism and Realism to Marxism in the Study of English and American Folksong,” in Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman eds., *Comparative Musicology, Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology* (Chicago, 1991), 113-30; the Interlude on “The Mary Scott Complex” is a reworking of an essay in *The Ballad Image: Essays Presented to Bertrand Harris Bronson* (Los Angeles, 1983), 59-94; “The Cultural Expropriation of ‘Lillibulero’” was published in *Scottish Studies Review*, 5/1 (2004), 19-32; Chapters Six and Seven are derived from the article, “Convergence, Divergence, and Dialectic in Folksong Paradigms: Critical Directions for Transatlantic Scholarship,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (1993): 61-98; Chapter Eight reprises some of the topics in “From Sung Story to Storied Song: Ballad Classification and the Missing Performer”, in *9. Arbeitstagung über Fragen des Typenindex der europäischen Volksballaden*. Ed. Rolf W. Brednich, Jürgen Dittmar, David G. Engle, Ildikó Kriza (Budapest, 1979), 174-92; Chapter Nine appeared in *Scottish Studies Review* 4.1 (2003), 24-40; Chapter Ten is a revision of “(Ballad-) Singing and Transformativity”, from *ARV: Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 1992, vol. 48 (1993): 165-80; Chapter Eleven was published in *Bridging the Cultural Divide: Our Common Ballad Heritage*. Ed. Sigrid Rieuwerts and Helga Stein (Hildesheim, 2000), 356-74; and the Epilogue draws ideas from “Toward a Theory and Method of Ballad Performance”, in *Ballads and Boundaries: Narrative Singing in an Intercultural Context*. Ed. James Porter (Los Angeles, 1995), 225-30. I should like to acknowledge permission to use those revised essays in this volume that appeared elsewhere in their original form: the Western States Folklore Society (Chapter Three); the University of Chicago Press (Chapter Five); the Association of Scottish Literary Studies (the “Lillibulero” Interlude and Chapter Nine); the American Folklore Society (Chapters Six and Seven); the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Chapter

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PROLOGUE

Prologue

The title of this book announces three topics relating to traditional ballads in a world that strives to modernize its institutional and expressive structures: genre, conflict, and presence. Enough has been written about “modernizing”, “modernization” and the artistic counterpart, “modernism” to forgo elaboration of these concepts here. But the concepts have been around for at least a hundred years, and this book is essentially a study of one traditional form of expressive culture, namely balladry, in the twentieth century as it weathered the storms of revolution, war, and that accomplice of modernism, advancing technology. The first of the main topics, genre, raises the question: do ballads, traditional or modern, constitute a genre, and if so, in what sense? The second topic asks: how does this genre (or style) manifest or deal with conflict, both internally and externally, as an artistic form and a social statement? And the third, how do ballads make their presence felt in the modern world? The first issue concerns the nature of ballads, the second, their transformations and social consequences, and the third, their potential as human communication.

In discussing these questions I use the collective term “ballads” rather than a singular “the ballad”. This is not a minor distinction, especially since the latter usage became common among literary scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they progressively idealized (and continue even now to idealize) traditional ballad texts. For ballads are multi-form, and in anthropological terms multiplex. Cast in various moulds they fit diverse social purposes, from the “classical” ballads of Child (Scotland and England), Grundtvig (Denmark), Meier (Germany), Nigra (Italy) and others who gathered printed versions and built their editions into monuments of literary scholarship, to quite different generic or sub-generic types: lyric descriptions of love encounters, laments for the dead, lullabies for infants, broadsheet news items, bawdy street versions enacted by ballad-sellers, or ideologically-driven verses attacking capitalism or injustice.

Genre

The first question, the generic nature of ballads, has received a fair amount of attention in recent times. “Genre” is a problematic concept in the study of folklore forms. Like the hazardous, unfashionable or outdated term “race” it is subject to serious qualification, especially in relation to traditional oral forms of song. As a term purporting to organize literary and traditional forms into classes

it stems from a nineteenth-century obsession with taxonomy. To undertake classification of the natural world, however, is qualitatively different from grouping products of the human imagination, and to designate forms as “epic”, “ballad” and “lyric” is to impose them on traditional and expressive verbal structures that are often recalcitrant. Yet attention to popular ballads as a genre, for example, has focussed mainly on the features of “traditional” examples of the type collated by the American editor Francis James Child in his classic edition of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98).

Recently, again, the broadside ballads ignored and despised by Child as “veritable dunghills” have come under increasing scrutiny. As print objects they were widely disseminated in the seventeenth century, often termed their “golden age”, but they survived well into modern times. A number of prominent scholars have demonstrated how ballads, whether oral or printed, were constantly in interaction with one another. Such songs were apprehended, studied and used, often, for ideological purposes in both Britain and North America. There is no question that scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of whom seem to have had little or no contact with a living tradition, idealized the ballad form from a study of the recovered verbal texts.

To many such scholars of course belonged, and still does, the worthy task of illuminating the historic, late medieval texts. Yet without a sense of how the ballads were communicated, either in singing or through other means of enactment, the interpretation of texts can only go so far. This argument is by now well accepted, for it is not enough to treat “orality” or the “oral qualities” of the ballad as if it were the whole cloth, for this orality usually means just the verbal matter of the song and what is communicated through the words. A very few scholars in the Parry-Lord ambit have attempted analysis of music or singing, and then only in the case of formulas. A literary-philological orientation has tended to bypass the hints, the suggestions imposed by melodic shape and gesture – in live sung communication of ballad to an audience – that cumulatively affect structure, narrative and emotional impact.²

Students of balladry generally admit now that the term “ballad” can mean many different types of sung verse, though the main limitation to this concept

² See the remark by the editors, Bennett and Firth, in a recent collection of studies, *The Singer and the Scribe* (11): “Although for increasingly obvious reasons ballads in all traditions are treated as literary or at least ethnographic artefacts, performance – singing or reciting – remains central to the ballad as cultural phenomenon . . .”. See also Tori Matsui, “How Was ‘Judas’ Sung?”.