

2. Joseph Addison (1672-1719) [XLIII]:
The Spectator, 4 vols., ed. by Gregory Smith. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1907; rpt. 1958.

3. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) [XLI]:
The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. by Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.
Essays and Introductions. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961.
Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats, Vol. I, ed. by John P. Frayne. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1970.

4. Edwin Muir (1887-1959) [XLI]:
Autobiography. London: The Hogarth Press, revised ed. 1954.
The Estate of Poetry. London: The Hogarth Press, 1962.

5. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) [XLI]:
The Sacred Wood. London: Methuen, 1920.
A Choice of Kipling's Verse. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1941.
On Poetry and Poets. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1957.

6. Herbert Read (1893-1968) [XLII]:
Phases of English Poetry. London: The Hogarth Press, 1928.
Annals of Innocence and Experience. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1940; revised 1946.

7. Robert Graves (1895-) [XLII]:
On English Poetry. London: Heinemann, 1922.
The English Ballad: A Short Critical Survey. London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1927.
Goodbye to All That. London: Cassell, 1929; revised 1957.
The Crowning Privilege: Collected Essays on Poetry. London: Cassell, 1955.
English and Scottish Ballads. London: Heinemann, 1957.
Poetic Craft and Principle. London: Cassell, 1967.

ing any emendation whatsoever.

LITERARY BALLADRY

1. Sir Walter Scott¹⁴⁾

The Monk was so highly popular that it seemed to create an epoch in our literature. But the public were chiefly captivated by the poetry with which Mr Lewis has interspersed his prose narrative. It has now passed from recollection among the changes of literary taste; but many may remember as well as I do the effect produced by the beautiful ballad of *Durandarte*, which had the good fortune to be adapted to an air of great sweetness and pathos; by the ghost tale of *Alonzo and Imogine*; and by several other pieces of legendary poetry which addressed themselves in all the charms of novelty and of simplicity to a public who had for a long time been unused to any regale of the kind. In his poetry as well as his prose Mr Lewis had been a successful imitator of the Germans, both in his attachment to the ancient ballad and in the tone of superstition which they willingly mingle with it. New arrangements of the stanza and a varied construction of verses were also adopted, and welcomed as an addition of a new string to the British harp. In this respect the stanza in which *Alonzo the Brave* is written was greatly admired, and received as an improvement worthy of adoption into English poetry.

INDEX

To the preceding numbers of *Studies in the Humanities* (Vols. XLI-XLIII, 1977-79). Only the poets and their works are listed for convenience' sake, with the Roman numerals in brackets showing the volume in which they are quoted. An independent and minute index will be attached to the final organization of the materials when the series is completed.

1. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) [XLIII]:

The Defence of Poesie, Political Discourses, Correspondence, Translation (The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney, Vol. III), ed. by Albert Feuillerat. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1912; rpt. 1962.

14) 'Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad,' in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, p. 552.

This mode, then, of editing ancient ballads, by subjecting them to the process of refinement now described, though it be more conscientious and less liable to censure than another method also resorted to, is nevertheless highly objectionable, as effectually marring the venerable simplicity of early song, destroying in a great measure its characteristic peculiarities, and as being the means of introducing erroneous conceptions regarding our vernacular poetry, which has been recovered from tradition.

All versions of a ballad so preserved by oral transmission from one age to another, are entitled to be considered as of equal authenticity, and coeval production, one with the other, although among them, wide and irreconcilable discrepancies exist. Indeed, the differences between some copies of the same ballad are so important, that their existence can be accounted for in no other way, than by supposing these different versions the productions of so many distinct minstrels, each of whom obtained the story, which he versified from a channel foreign to that accessible by his fellow poets. Some of these diversities, it is true, may be attributable to the interpolations and corruptions acquired in the course of time, through the ignorance of reciters. Some are inaccurately committed to memory at first, and are thus in an incomplete form delivered. Others are in part forgotten, and the defects of the memory may be supplied by the invention of the reciter, or the limb of some other similar composition substituted for that which is lost. But allowing the utmost latitude for the many mutations incident to this species of literature, still it cannot account for all the variations we find in these copies, several of which ought to be elevated to the rank of distinct ballads in place of being regarded as mere variations from one original text.

Under the pressure of such circumstances, then, it surely is the duty of the collector and editor of Traditionary ballads, to avoid the perilous and frequently abortive task, of uniting discordant and essentially incohesive texts, and to content himself with merely selecting that one of his copies which appears the most complete and least vitiated—and to give it purely and simply as he obtained it, without hazard-

they what they may in magnitude, all are alike deserving of unmitigated condemnation.

It is perhaps unnecessary to mention, that of every old traditionary ballad known, there exists what may be called different versions. In other words, the same story is told after a different fashion in one district of the country, from what it is remembered in another. It therefore not unfrequently occurs, that no two copies obtained in parts of the country distant from each other, will be found completely to tally in their texts; perhaps they may not have a single stanza which is mutual property, except certain commonplaces which seem an integral portion of the original mechanism, of all our ancient ballads, and the presence of which forms one of their most peculiar and distinctive characteristics, as contrasted with the modern ballad. Both of these copies, however, narrate the same story. In that particular, their identity with each other cannot be disputed; but in many minute circumstances, as well as in the way by which the same catastrophe is brought out, sensible differences exist. By selecting the most beautiful and striking passages, which present themselves in the one copy, and making these cohere as they best may, with similar extracts detached from the other copy, the editor of oral poetry succeeds in producing from the conflicting texts of his various authorities, a [third] version more perfect and ornate than any individual one as it originally stood. This improved version may contain the quintessence—the poetick elements of each copy consulted, but in this general resemblance to all, it loses its particular affinity to any one. Its individuality entirely disappears, and those features by which each separate copy proved its authenticity, in the collated version, become faint and dubious, confused and undistinguishable. Such copies, however, are those which find their way readiest into our every-day compilations of such things, as well on account of their superior poetical merit, as of the comparative distinctness and fulness of their narrative; and to readers not accustomed to enquire into the nature of traditionary poetry, they thus convey very inaccurate impressions of the state in which these compositions are actually extant among us.

scrupulous and unshrinking fidelity. If they are at all worth preserving, and no one who has an unsophisticated and manly taste can deny that they are so, it assuredly must be in the very garb in which they are remembered and known, and can be proved to exist amongst us. It will not do to indulge in idle speculations as to what they once may have been, and to recast them in what we may fancy were their original moulds. We may regret that attention was not earlier bestowed on this neglected though interesting portion of national literature, but the only step we are warranted in taking to remedy what Sir Thomas Brown has denominated "the supinity of elder times," is that of preventing its future dilapidation, by now carefully and accurately gathering what of its wreck we can yet find floating around us. The time may come when even these fragments will also be irretrievably borne beyond our reach.

Collections of these ballads printed as they orally exist will to those who succeed us prove a source of peculiar gratification—a record of the most instructive and interesting kind. They convey to posterity, that description of song which is peculiarly national and characteristick; that body of poetry which has inwoven itself with the feelings and passions of the people, and which shadows forth as it were an actual embodiment of their Universal mind, and of its intellectual and moral tendencies. They communicate too, another favour, which we would be glad had been conferred on us by any authority a century old, that is, the means of ascertaining what in our day were deemed ancient compositions, and what of more recent or of contemporaneous date with ourselves.

Evident however as the importance is of thus collecting our traditional poetry, purely as it is to be found, it unfortunately happens, that this has been too often slightly and slovenly executed. With many of these ballads, liberties of the most exceptionable and flagrant description have occasionally been taken by their respective editors, liberties as uncalled for as they are unpardonable in the eye of every rigid and honest critick. Some of these offences against truth and correct taste, are of a very deep, others of a lighter shade of criminality, but be

mother tongue. With them, primitive forms of speech, peculiar idiomatich expressions, and antique phrases, are still in use, which we would look for in vain in the literature of the present day, or in its wordbooks, which are not professedly dedicated to the "Restitution of Decayed Intelligence." It is not therefore with the unlettered and the rude, that oral song suffers vital and irremediable wrong. What they have received from their forefathers, they transmit in the same shape to their children....

Localities and persons [may,] it is true, be occasionally shifted to answer the meridian of the Reciter, and obsolete terms and epithets be laid aside for others more generally in use; but what may be called the facts of these compositions, are never disturbed, nor are their individual or characteristich features ever lost. The tear and wear of three centuries will do less mischief to the text of an old ballad among the vulgar, than one short hour will effect, if in the possession of some sprightly and accomplished editor of the present day, who may choose to impose on himself the thankless and uncalled for labour of piecing and patching up its imperfections, polishing its asperities, correcting its mistakes, embellishing its naked details, purging it of impurities, and of trimming it from top to toe with tailor-like fastidiousness and nicety, so as to be made fit for the press. For thus remodelling ancient Song, such complacent wights claim as their reward the merest trifle—that of saddling antiquity with the sin of begetting, and the shame of maintaining, a few of the singularly beautiful and delicate growths of their own overproductive fancy. These pernicious and disingenuous practices breed a sickly loathing in the mind of every conscientious antiquary, and would, if not checked and exposed, in a short while, lay the broad axe to the root of every thing like authenticity in oral song.

The almost total absence of written monuments to support the claims of Scotland to an inheritance of Ancient National Minstrelsy enforces the stern necessity of not wantonly tampering with the fleeting and precarious memorials tradition has bequeathed to these latter times. Hence it has become of the first importance to collect these songs with

he was apt to consider the worst as most genuine, as if a poem was not more likely to be deteriorated than improved by passing through the mouths of many reciters. In the Ballads of Robin Hood this superstitious scrupulosity was especially to be regretted, as it tended to enlarge the collection with a great number of doggerel compositions which are all copies of each other, turning on the same idea of Bold Robin meeting with a shepherd, a tinker, a mendicant, a tanner, etc. etc., by each and all of whom he is soundly thrashed, and all of whom he receives into his band. The tradition, which avers that it was the brave outlaw's custom to try a bout at quarter-staff with his young recruits, might indeed have authorized one or two such tales, but the greater part ought to have been rejected as modern imitations of the most paltry kind, composed probably about the age of James I of England. By adopting this spurious trash as part of Robin Hood's history, he is represented as the best cudgelled hero, Don Quixote excepted, that ever was celebrated in prose or rhyme. Ritson also published several garlands of North Country songs.

Looking on this eminent antiquary's labours in a general point of view, we may deprecate the eagerness and severity of his prejudices, and feel surprise that he should have shown so much irritability of disposition on such a topic as a collection of old ballads, which certainly have little in them to affect the passions; and we may be sometimes provoked at the pertinacity with which he has preferred bad readings to good.

4. William Motherwell¹³⁾

Language, which, in the written literature of a country, is ever varying, suffers no material changes nor corruptions among the lower and uneducated classes of society, by whom it is spoken, as their

¹³'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, pp. iii-vii. As a matter of course Motherwell was loyal to his own view when he edited his *Minstrelsy*, and writes towards the end of the 'Introduction' that "It has been the studious endeavour of the present writer to avoid every thing which savoured of critical emendation" (p. ci).

whole that he has, in many instances, decorated the ancient ballads with the graces of a more refined period.

This system is so distinctly intimated that if there be any critic still of opinion, like poor Ritson, whose morbid temperament led him to such a conclusion that the crime of literary imitation is equal to that of commercial forgery, he ought to recollect that guilt, in the latter case, does not exist without a corresponding charge of uttering the forged document, or causing it to be uttered, as genuine, without which the mere imitation is not culpable, at least not criminally so. This quality is totally wanting in the accusation so roughly brought against Dr Percy, who avowedly indulged in such alterations and improvements upon his materials as might adapt them to the taste of an age not otherwise disposed to bestow its attention on them.

3. Sir Walter Scott¹²⁾

Next year Mr Ritson published *Robin Hood* (2 vols., 1795), being "A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated Outlaw." This work is a notable illustration of the excellences and defects of Mr Ritson's system. It is almost impossible to conceive so much zeal, research, and industry bestowed on a subject of antiquity. There scarcely occurs a phrase or word relating to Robin Hood, whether in history or poetry, in law books, in ancient proverbs or common parlance, but it is here collected and explained. At the same time the extreme fidelity of the editor seems driven to excess when we find him pertinaciously retaining all the numerous and gross errors which repeated recitations have introduced into the text, and regarding it as a sacred duty to prefer the worst to the better readings, as if their inferiority was a security for their being genuine. In short, when Ritson copied from rare books or ancient manuscripts there could not be a more accurate editor; when taking his authority from oral tradition and judging between two recited copies,

12) 'Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry,' in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, p. 524.

a more critical age than that in which they were composed. Words were thus altered, phrases improved, and whole verses were inserted or omitted at pleasure. Such freedoms were especially taken with the poems published from a folio manuscript in Dr Percy's own possession, very curious from the miscellaneous nature of its contents, but unfortunately having many of the leaves mutilated and injured in other respects by the gross carelessness and ignorance of the transcriber. Anxious to avail himself of the treasures which this manuscript contained, the editor of the *Reliques* did not hesitate to repair and renovate the songs which he drew from this corrupted yet curious source, and to accommodate them with such emendations as might recommend them to the modern taste.

For these liberties with his subject Ritson censured Dr Percy in the most uncompromising terms, accused him in violent language of interpolation and forgery, and insinuated that there existed no such thing *in rerum natura* as that folio manuscript, so often referred to as the authority of originals inserted in the *Reliques*. In this charge the eagerness of Ritson again betrayed him farther than judgment and discretion as well as courtesy warranted. It is no doubt highly desirable that the text of ancient poetry should be given untouched and uncorrupted. But this is a point which did not occur to the editor of the *Reliques* in 1765, whose object it was to win the favour of the public at a period when the great difficulty was not how to secure the very words of old ballads, but how to arrest attention upon the subject at all. That great and important service to national literature would probably never have been attained without the work of Dr Percy—a work which first fixed the consideration of general readers on ancient poetry and made it worth while to enquire how far its graces were really antique, or how far derived from the taste with which the publication had been superintended and revised. The object of Dr Percy was certainly intimated in several parts of his work, where he ingenuously acknowledges that certain ballads have received emendations, and that others are not of pure and unmixed antiquity; that the beginning of some and end of others have been supplied; and upon the

most of which were collected many years ago, during his early youth. But he has been enabled, in many instances, to supply and correct the deficiencies of his own copies from a collection of Border songs, frequently referred to in the work, under the title of *Glenriddels' MS.* This was compiled from various sources by the late Mr Riddel, of Glenriddel, a sedulous Border antiquary, and since his death has become the property of Mr Jollie, bookseller at Carlisle; to whose liberality the Editor owes the use of it while preparing this work for the press. No liberties have been taken, either with the recited or written copies of these ballads, farther than that, where they disagreed, which is by no means unusual, the Editor, in justice to the author, has uniformly preserved what seemed to him the best or most poetical reading of the passage. Such discrepancies must very frequently occur, wherever poetry is preserved by oral tradition; for the reciter, making it a uniform principle to proceed at all hazards, is very often, when his memory fails him, apt to substitute large portions from some other tale, altogether distinct from that which he has commenced. Besides, the prejudices of clans and of districts have occasioned variations in the mode of telling the same story. Some arrangement was also occasionally necessary to recover the rhyme, which was often, by the ignorance of the reciters, transposed or thrown into the middle of the line. With these freedoms, which were essentially necessary to remove obvious corruptions, and fit the ballads for the press, the Editor presents them to the public, under the complete assurance that they carry with them the most indisputable marks of their authenticity.

2. Sir Walter Scott¹¹⁾

[Dr Percy], as a poet and a man of taste, was tempted to take such freedoms with his original ballads as might enable him to please

11) 'Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry,' in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, pp. 519-520. Scott's great sympathy with Percy's methods of editing has led him, as a matter of course, to recognize Percy as a successful imitator of the ancient ballad. (See 'Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad,' in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, p. 542.)

sixteenth century, when its beams became more widely diffused, they were far from penetrating the recesses of the Border mountains. The tales of tradition, the song, with the pipe or harp of the minstrel, were probably the sole resources against *ennui* during the short intervals of repose from military adventure....

The more rude and wild the state of society, the more general and violent is the impulse received from poetry and music. The muse, whose effusions are the amusement of a very small part of a polished nation, records, in the laws of inspiration, the history, the laws, the very religion of savages. Where the pen and the press are wanting, the flow of numbers impresses upon the memory of posterity the deeds and sentiments of their forefathers. Verse is naturally connected with music; and among a rude people the union is seldom broken. By this natural alliance the lays, "steeped in the stream of harmony," are more easily retained by the reciter, and produce upon his audience a more impressive effect. Hence there has hardly been found to exist a nation so brutishly rude as not to listen with enthusiasm to the songs of their bards, recounting the exploits of their forefathers, recording their laws and moral precepts, or hymning the praises of their deities. But where the feelings are frequently stretched to the highest pitch, by the vicissitudes of a life of danger and military adventure, this predisposition of a savage people, to admire their own rude poetry and music, is heightened, and its tone becomes peculiarly determined. It is not the peaceful Hindu at his loom, it is not the timid Esquimaux in his canoe, whom we must expect to glow at the war-song of Tyrtæus. The music and the poetry of each country must keep pace with their usual tone of mind as well as with the state of society.

EDITORSHIP

1. Sir Walter Scott¹⁰⁾

It is chiefly from this latter source [the shepherds and aged persons in the recesses of the Border] that the Editor has drawn his materials,

10) 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, pp. 66-67.

the poet is perfectly master of the dialogue he holds with the maid he left behind him: nor is he at a loss accurately to describe how the fiend can, with a single kick of his cloven foot, sink a goodly bark, although reasonable doubts may well be entertained how such facts could have transpired, seeing none of its crew ever reached the land to sing of such an "unhappy voyage," more terrifick by a deal, than that performed under the melancholy auspices of that "brisk and tall young man," hight "William Glen," who was bound for, but alas never returned from, "New Barbarie."

But be the subject of the narrative what it may, whether it be of real life fraught with an interest deeply tragical, or one of wild superstition and romantick incident, it will ever be found clearly, succinctly and impressively told. There is no unnecessary waste of words—no redundancy of circumstances, nor artful involution of plot—and no laying of colour above colour, to give a body and brilliancy to the picture. It stands out in simple and severe beauty—a beauty arising not from the loveliness of any one individual feature, but from the perfect harmony and wholeness subsisting among, and sustaining all.

MUSIC

1. Sir Walter Scott⁹⁾

The domestic economy of the Borderers next engages our attention. That the revenue of the chieftain should be expended in rude hospitality, was the natural result of his situation. His wealth consisted chiefly in herds of cattle, which were consumed by the kinsmen, vassals, and followers, who aided him to acquire and to protect them. We learn from Lesly* that the Borderers were temperate in the use of intoxicating liquors, and we are therefore left to conjecture how they occupied the time when winter or when accident confined them to their habitations. The little learning, which existed in the Middle Ages, glimmered a dim and dying flame in the religious houses; and even in the

9) 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, pp. 60-61.

* Lesly, John (1527-1596), Scottish clergyman and historian.

clear that which may have been dimly expressed, or slightly hinted; and there is no pause made to gather on the way beautiful images or appropriate illustrations. If these come naturally and unavoidably, as it were, good and well, but there is no loitering and winding about and about as if unwilling to move on till these should suggest themselves. The charm of the composition lies in the story which it evolves. Strained and artificial feeling has no place in it, and rhetorical embellishments are equally unknown. Descriptions of natural scenery are never attempted, and sentiment is almost unheard of. Much is always left for imagination to fancy, and for the feelings of the auditors, to supply, roused as they cannot fail to be, by the scenick picture rapidly and distinctly traced before the mind's eye. In his narrative, the poet always appears to be acting in good faith with his audience. He does not sing to another what he discredits himself, nor does he appeal to other testimony in support of his statements. There is no reference to "as the boke tells," or "as in Romans I rede," for a corroboration of what he affirms. He always speaks as if the subject which he handles were one quite familiar to those whom he addresses, and touching which nothing but a perfectly honest and circumstantial statement of facts could be relished. If fifteen stalworth foresters are slain by one stout knight, single handed, he never steps out of his way to prove the truth of such an achievement, by appealing to the exploits of some other notable manslayer. If a mermaid should, from a love of solitude and the picturesque, haunt some lone and lovely river, and there, while keming her yellow locks, peradventure fascinate some unhappy wight, the poet never apologises for the appearance of the waterwoman, by covertly insinuating how marvellous be the inhabitants of the ocean—and though an Elfin knight should unceremoniously adopt for his paramour, some young lady whom he meets of a summer's evening, while rambling through the gay greenwood, and whose taste for the lovelinesses of nature, is certainly more remarkable than her prudence; he never betrays any surprise at the circumstance, but treats it as a matter of every day occurrence and historical notoriety. Should an unhappy ghost wander back to earth,

Philip Sydney feel that the tale of Percy and Douglas moved him like the sound of a trumpet? or why is it that a Swiss sickens at hearing the famous Ranz des Vaches, to which the native of any other country would have listened for a hundred days, without any other sensation than ennui? I fear our poetical taste is in general much more linked with our prejudices of birth, of education, and of habitual thinking, than our vanity will allow us to suppose; and that, let the point of the poet's dart be as sharp as that of Cupid, it is the wings lent it by the fancy and prepossessions of the gentle reader which carry it to the mark. It may appear like great egotism to pretend to illustrate my position from the reception which the productions of so mere a ballad-monger as myself have met with from the public; but I cannot help observing that all Scotchmen prefer the Eve of St John to Glenfinlas, and most of my English friends entertain precisely an opposite opinion.

2. William Motherwell⁸⁾

The first thing that solicits our notice in the Romantick ballad, is the almost uniform dramattick cast of its structure. The action of the piece commences at once. It does not, like the metrical romance, proceed after craving the attention of lord and lady, and invoking the aid of the Virgin Mary, &c., to give a sketch of the parentage, education, and promising qualities of the doughty knight or gentle squire who is to figure in it. There is no pompous announcement of the exquisite enjoyment to be derived from the carping of such noble *gestes*. If such particulars are at all alluded to, they are noticed merely incidentally, and dashed off perhaps in a single line. The characters and the destinies of those who form the subject of such tales are learned from their actions, not by the description of the poet. They generally open with some striking and natural picture, pregnant with life and motion. The story runs on in an arrowlike stream, with all the straightforwardness of unfeigned and earnest passion. There is no turning back to mend what has been said amiss, to render more

8) 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, pp. xii-xiv.

enjoy peculiar features, which not only distinguish them from the like sort of compositions produced in more recent times, but certain characteristics which separate them from the written poetry of their own day, and identify them with each other as belonging to one body and family of National Minstrelsy. These features, it will be found, are common also to the early traditional poetry of the Scandinavian provinces of Europe; and constitute, in fact, the bounding line which exists between what is the Oral and what is the Written poetry of a people, or of that poetry which is equally intelligible to the unlettered as to the learned.

STORY

1. Sir Walter Scott⁷⁾

Much of [our popular poetry's] peculiar charm is indeed, I believe, to be attributed solely to its *locality*. A very commonplace and obvious epithet, when applied to a scene which we have been accustomed to view with pleasure, recalls to us not merely the local scenery, but a thousand little nameless associations, which we are unable to separate or to define. In some verses of that eccentric but admirable poet, Coleridge, he talks of

“An old rude tale that suited well
The ruins wild and hoary.”

I think there are few who have not been in some degree touched with this local sympathy. Tell a peasant an ordinary tale of robbery and murder, and perhaps you may fail to interest him; but to excite his terrors, you assure him it happened on the very heath he usually crosses, or to a man whose family he has known, and you rarely meet such a mere image of Humanity as remains entirely unmoved. I suspect it is pretty much the same with myself, and many of my countrymen, who are charmed by the effect of local description, and sometimes impute that effect to the poet, which is produced by the recollections and associations which his verses excite. Why else did Sir

7) 'Letter to Anna Seward, June 29, 1802,' *The Letters*, Vol. I, 146-47.

so thoroughly blended, that to fix the antiquity of traditional song by any evidence which its diction supplies, is a hopeless, and, at best, an unsatisfactory endeavour.

“There are in Scotland,” says Ritson, “many ballads or legendary and romantick songs, composed in a singular style, and preserved by tradition among the country people. It must, however, be confessed, that none of these compositions bear satisfactory marks of the antiquity they pretend to, while the expressions or allusions occurring in some, would seem to fix their origin to a very modern date.”* The opinions of a writer of so much acuteness and information in poetick archaology as Ritson, however hastily and inconsiderately delivered, are deserving of attention; but in this quotation it is to be observed that he only refers to the “expressions and allusions” interspersed through the ballads he had an opportunity of studying, not to their general structure and to those common places and curious burdens they frequently have, which serve as land marks, and helps to the memory of the reciter, while they secure the stream of the narrative from being broken or interrupted by the innovations of time, and the mutations of language. It is granted at once that the “expressions and allusions” of these compositions fluctuate, and that frequently, but these changes never alter entirely the venerable aspect of the whole ballad. It is like repairing gradually the weather worn face of an ancient cathedral, by the insertion here and there of a freshly hewn stone, as need may require. The outline of the building and the effect of the whole remain unchanged. Though the comparatively modern look of ballad phraseology, so far as dependant on certain allusions and expressions, is admitted to greater latitude than what is truly the fact, it is well known to those acquainted with the subject, that they still retain many “aureat termes,” struck in the mint of the olden time, amply sufficient to vouch for their remote extraction and gentle blood, even were there no other evidence at hand of a less questionable and suspicious kind. That evidence is contained in the bosom of the ballads themselves. They

* Historical Essay prefixed to “Scottish Song, Lond. 1794,” p. lxxx.

who endeavoured to recite with fidelity the words of the author might indeed fall into errors of sound and sense and substitute corruptions for words he did not understand. But the ingenuity of a skilful critic could often, in that case, revive and restore the original meaning; while the corrupted words became in such cases a warrant for the authenticity of the whole poem.

In general, however, the later reciters appear to have been far less desirous to speak the author's words than to introduce amendments and new readings of their own, which have always produced the effect of modernizing, and usually that of degrading and vulgarizing, the rugged sense and spirit of the antique minstrel. Thus, undergoing from age to age a gradual process of alteration and recomposition, our popular and oral minstrelsy has lost in a great measure its original appearance; and the strong touches by which it had been formerly characterized have been generally smoothed down and destroyed by a process similar to that by which a coin, passing from hand to hand, loses in circulation all the finer marks of the impress.

2. William Motherwell⁶⁾

To point out what truly are the most ancient of these compositions, cannot be attempted with any success. Though tradition may faithfully transmit to us the narrative uninjured and unshorn of any part of its circumstance, nay even give the sentiments of the poet unaltered, and preserve the character of the piece precisely as at first portrayed, yet it alters the language so completely, that not a word may be preserved which originally was there. The phraseology of one age, as it becomes obsolete and strange, is in oral literature, ever supplanted by equivalent terms which are better understood, or are in daily use; and these again in their turn, at some future period, yield to the same inexorable law of perpetual mutation. Thus the distinguishing features of different ages, so far as these are indicated by language, become

6) 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, pp. x-xii. Those distinctive and unchangeable features of traditional ballads will be sketched in the following **STORY-2**.

poet saves himself a little trouble by using exactly the same words in which it was originally couched, to secure its being transmitted to the person for whose ear it was intended. The bards of ruder climes and less favoured languages may indeed claim the countenance of Homer for such repetitions; but whilst in the Father of Poetry they give the reader an opportunity to pause and look back upon the enchanted ground over which they have travelled, they afford nothing to the modern bard, save facilitating the power of stupefying the audience with stanzas of dull and tedious iteration.

Another cause of the flatness and insipidity, which is the great imperfection of ballad poetry, is to be ascribed less to the compositions in their original state when rehearsed by their *authors*, than to the ignorance and errors of the reciters or transcribers by whom they have been transmitted to us. The more popular the composition of an ancient poet, or *Maker*, became, the greater chance there was of its being corrupted; for a poem transmitted through a number of reciters, like a book reprinted in a multitude of editions, incurs the risk of impertinent interpolations from the conceit of one rehearser, unintelligible blunders from the stupidity of another, and omissions equally to be regretted from the want of memory in a third.... It cannot be expected that compositions subjected in this way to mutilation and corruption should continue to present their original sense or diction; and the accuracy of our editions of popular poetry, unless in the rare event of recovering original or early copies, is lessened in proportion.

But the chance of these corruptions is incalculably increased when we consider that the ballads have been, not in one but innumerable instances of transmission, liable to similar alterations through a long course of centuries, during which they have been handed from one ignorant reciter to another, each discarding whatever original words or phrases time or fashion had, in his opinion, rendered obsolete, and substituting anachronisms by expressions taken from the customs of his own day. And here it may be remarked that the desire of the reciter to be intelligible, however natural and laudable, has been one of the greatest causes of the deterioration of ancient poetry. The minstrel

trumpet, the heroic blood of Sir Philip Sidney.

It is true that passages of this high character seldom occur; for, during the infancy of the art of poetry, the bards have been generally satisfied with a rude and careless expression of their sentiments; and even when a more felicitous expression or loftier numbers have been dictated by the enthusiasm of the composition, the advantage came unsought for, and perhaps unnoticed, either by the minstrel or the audience.

Another cause contributed to the tenuity of thought and poverty of expression, by which old ballads are too often distinguished. The apparent simplicity of the ballad stanza carried with it a strong temptation to loose and trivial composition. The collection of rhymes, accumulated by the earliest of the craft appear to have been considered as forming a joint stock for the common use of the profession; and not mere rhymes only, but verses and stanzas, have been used as common property, so as to give an appearance of sameness and crudity to the whole series of popular poetry. Such, for instance, is the salutation so often repeated——

“Now Heaven thee save, thou brave young knight,
Now Heaven thee save and see.”

And such the usual expression for taking counsel with.

“Rede me, rede me, brother dear,
My rede shall rise at thee.”

Such also is the unvaried account of the rose and the brier, which are said to spring out of the grave of the hero and heroine of these metrical legends, with little effort at a variation of the expressions in which the incident is prescriptively told. The least acquaintance with the subject will recall a great number of commonplace verses, which each ballad-maker has unceremoniously appropriated to himself; thereby greatly facilitating his own task, and at the same time degrading his art by the slovenly use of overscutched phrases. From the same indolence the ballad-mongers of most nations have availed themselves of every opportunity of prolonging their pieces, of the same kind, without the labour of actual composition. If a message is to be delivered, the

nalists. In general, these compositions may be considered as coeval with the events which they commemorate; but, with this class as with that which has been styled the Romantick ballad, it is not to be expected, that in their progress to our day, they have undergone no modifications of form, and these very considerable, from that in which there were originally produced and promulgated among the people.

This interesting body of popular poetry, part of which, in point of antiquity, may fairly be esteemed equal, if not superior, to the most ancient of our written monuments, has owed its preservation principally to oral tradition. With the exception of a very few pieces, which, more through accident than design, appear to have found their way into old MSS., or early printed volumes, the ancient Ballad Poetry of Scotland must literally be gathered from the lips of

“The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,
Who use to chaunt it.”

But fragile and capricious as the tenure may seem by which it has held its existence for centuries, it is worthy of remark how excellently well tradition serves as a substitute for more efficient and less mutable channels of communicating the things of past ages to posterity.

STYLE

1. Sir Walter Scott⁵⁾

To the lovers and admirers of poetry as an art it cannot be uninteresting to have a glimpse of the National Muse in her cradle, or to hear her babbling the earliest attempts at the formation of the tuneful sounds with which she was afterwards to charm posterity. And I may venture to add that among poetry, which, however rude, was a gift of Nature's first fruits, even a reader of refined taste will find his patience rewarded by passages in which the rude minstrel rises into sublimity or melts into pathos. These were the merits which induced the classical Addison to write an elaborate commentary upon the ballad of *Chevy Chase*, and which roused, like the sound of a

5) 'Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry,' in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, pp. 504-507.

occurring in it no compositions strictly called Songs, in the sense to which that term is now generally confined, except a few modern pieces, the slight observations with which it has been thought proper to introduce it, are to be understood as referring exclusively to the Ancient Romantick and Historick Ballad of Scotland.

Under the head of ROMANTICK, a phrase we are obliged to employ for lack of something more significant and precise, may be ranged a numerous and highly interesting body of short metrical tales, chiefly of a tragick complexion, which, though possessing all the features of real incident, and probably originating in fact, cannot now, after the lapse of many ages, be, with certainty, traced to any historical source, publick or private. With these may also be classed that description of ANCIENT SONG which treats of incredible achievements, and strange adventures by flood and field, —deals largely with the Marvellous in all its multiform aspects, —and occasionally pours a brief but intense glare of supernatural light over those dim and untravelled realms of Doubt and Dread, whose every nook the giant superstition of elder days has colonized with a prodigal profusion of mysterious and spiritual inhabitants. And in short, under this comprehensive head, we must include every legend relating to person, place, thing, or occurrence, to establish whose existence it would be vain to seek for other evidence than that which popular tradition supplies.

The other class is much easier described. It embraces all those narrative songs, which derive their origin from historical facts, whether of a publick or private nature. The subjects of these are national or personal conflicts, family feuds, publick or domestick transactions, personal adventure, or local incidents, which, in some shape or other, have fallen under the observation of contemporary and authentick an-

the fact that tradition is in all matters relative to popular poetry "a safe and almost unerring guide," Motherwell instances the well known ballad of *Edom o' Gordon*, "Which is traditionally preserved in Scotland, and of which there is... extant a copy [entitled *Captain Care*] in an English MS., apparently coeval with the date of the subject of the ballad." (*Ibid.*, p. iii.)

fore impracticable. If England exhibits ancient manuscripts in which these ballads are contained, Scotland proves immemorial possession of them, by oral transmission even to the present times. The claims of either party in this way, appear pretty equally balanced.

Ritson, with that scrupulous scepticism, for which his writings are generally remarkable, reluctantly admits that the following may be considered as Minstrel Ballads peculiar to England, viz.

- 1 The Battle of Chevy Chace.
- 2 The Battle of Otterbourne.
- 3 Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard.
- 4 Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor.
- 5 Fair Margaret and Sweet William.
- 6 John Dory.
- 7 John Armstrong.
- 8 Captain Care.

“Being all of this kind” he adds, “known to exist;” for Mr Ritson long pertinaciously denied the existence of the MS., from which Dr. Percy gave a number of the ballads published in the *Reliques*. This list is but scanty, and little would either country have to boast of its early Minstrelsy, were its limits to be thus circumscribed by the mere asseveration of learned petulance, and constitutional irritability. Of the eight ballads selected by Ritson as those “which according to the rules laid down by Dr Percy, may” as the critick observes, “be supposed to have been written and sung to the harp,” six are traditionally preserved in Scotland viz. the 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8, and these with such variations as may entitle them to be looked on as the composition of a native Minstrel, not adopted songs. At all events it shews the early intercommunity of song, which existed between the countries, and the perfect identity of their popular poetry.

DEFINITION

1. William Motherwell⁴⁾

As this compilation consists principally of Narrative Ballads, there

4) ‘Introduction’ to *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, pp. i-ii. In proof of

musicians, found their welcome to their night's quarters readily insured by their knowledge in legendary lore. John Graeme, of Sowport, in Cumberland, commonly called the Long Quaker,** a person of this latter description, was very lately alive; and several of the songs, now published, have been taken down from his recitation. The shepherds also, and aged persons, in the recesses of the Border mountains, frequently remember and repeat the warlike songs of their fathers. This is more especially the case in what are called the South Highland, where in many instances the same families have occupied the same possessions for centuries.

3. William Motherwell³⁾

The ballad poetry of England and Scotland, has been at one time so much alike, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discriminate between what truly may be considered as the native production of the one or the other. To lay down any general law for ascertaining their respective rights of property, in literature of this description, is there-

** This person, perhaps the last of our professed ballad reciters, died since the publication of the first edition of this work. He was by profession an itinerant cleaner of clocks and watches; but a stentorian voice and tenacious memory qualified him eminently for remembering accurately, and reciting with energy, the Border gathering songs and tales of war. His memory was latterly much impaired; yet the number of verses which he could pour forth, and the animation of his tone and gestures, formed a most extraordinary contrast to his extreme feebleness of person and dotage of mind (Scott's own note).

3) Motherwell, William (ed.), 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*, Glasgow: John Wylie, 1827, pp. xxxix-xl. The abridged form of this 'Introduction' is reprinted as 'preliminary Essay on Scottish Ballad Literature by W. Motherwell' in Mackay, Charles (ed.), *The Legendary and Romantic Ballads of Scotland* (London: Griffin, Bohn, & Co., 1861), which itself is, for the greater part, a reprint of Motherwell's *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern*.

See pp. 1-lii of the 'Introduction' where Motherwell remarks that "The history and poetry of Scotland has it must be gratefully acknowledged been deeply indebted to the pen of English Antiquarians, for its elucidation and preservation, and also to the English Press for its early publication. But the pious care thus shewn for the genius of another land, does not authorize any appropriation thereof," and discusses the question at issue about the birth-place of the ballad on the battle of Otterbourne fought in August 1388.

sped onward so fast, that notwithstanding the sharp appetite of thirteen, I forgot the hour of dinner, was sought for with anxiety, and was still found entranced in my intellectual banquet. To read and to remember was in this instance the same thing, and henceforth I overwhelmed my schoolfellows, and all who would hearken to me, with tragical recitations from the ballads of Bishop Percy. The first time, too, I could scrape a few shillings together, which were not common occurrences with me, I bought unto myself a copy of these beloved volumes, nor do I believe I ever read a book half so frequently, or with half the enthusiasm.

2. Sir Walter Scott²⁾

The causes of the preservation of these songs have either entirely ceased, or are gradually decaying. Whether they were originally the composition of minstrels, professing the joint arts of poetry and music; or whether they were the occasional effusions of some self-taught bard, is a question into which I do not here mean to inquire. But it is certain that till a very late period the pipers, of whom there was one attached to each Border town of note, and whose office was often hereditary, were the great depositaries of oral, and particularly of poetical, tradition. About spring-time, and after harvest, it was the custom of these musicians to make a progress through a particular district of the country. The music and the tale repaid their lodging, and they were usually gratified with a donation of seed corn....*

By means of these men much traditional poetry was preserved, which must otherwise have perished. Other itinerants, not professed

2) 'Introduction' to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, pp. 65-66.

* These town-pipers, an institution of great antiquity upon the Borders, were certainly the last remains of the minstrel race. Robin Hastie, town-piper of Jedburgh, perhaps the last of the order, died nine or ten years ago: his family was supposed to have held the office for about three centuries. Old age had rendered Robin a wretched performer; but he knew several old songs and tunes, which have probably died along with him. The town-pipers received a livery and salary from the community to which they belonged; and in some burghs they had a small allotment of land called the Piper's Croft (Scott's own note).

STUDY MATERIALS
ON THE LITERARY BALLAD

POETS ON THE BALLAD (4)

—Sir Walter Scott and W. Motherwell—

Mitsuyoshi Yamanaka

HERITAGE

1. Sir Walter Scott¹⁾

I then first became acquainted with Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*. As I had been from infancy devoted to legendary lore of this nature, and only reluctantly withdrew my attention, from the scarcity of materials and the rudeness of those which I possessed, it may be imagined, but cannot be described, with what delight I saw pieces of the same kind which had amused my childhood, and still continued in secret the Delilahs of my imagination, considered as the subject of sober research, grave commentary, and apt illustration, by an editor who showed his poetical genius was capable of emulating the best qualities of what his pious labour preserved. I remember well the spot where I read these volumes for the first time. It was beneath a huge platanus-tree, in the ruins of what had been intended for an old-fashioned arbour in the *garden* I have mentioned. The summer day

1) 'Chapter I Memoir of the early life of Sir Walter Scott, written by himself,' in Lockhart, J. G., *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott* (5 vols.), Vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1900), 29-30. This experience was so impressive that Scott frequently refers to it in different places: cf. In his letter to Bishop Percy (11th January 1801) he confesses that it was "an era in my poetical taste which I shall never forget," and continues, "The very grass sod seat to which (when a boy of twelve years old) I retreated from my playfellows, to devour the works of the ancient minstrels, is still fresh and dear to my memory." [Grierson, H. J. C. (ed.), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott* (12 vols.), Vol. I (1787-1807), London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1932, p. 108.]; see also his 'Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad,' in Sir Walter Scott (ed.), *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. by Thomas Henderson, London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1931, p. 553.