Oral Tradition and Book Culture

Edited by
Pertti Anttonen, Cecilia af Forselles and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander

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Contents

Pertti Anttonen, Cecilia af Forselles & Kirsti Salmi-Niklander
Introduction: Oral Tradition and Book Culture 7

Margaret J.M. Ezell
"But the Lord said to me, 'Say Not guilty'":
Recreating Courtroom Drama in Trial Accounts by 17th-Century
English Sectarian Women 19

Rikard Wingård
Argumentum as Oral Substitute and the Transformations
of *Volksbuch* Peritexts 32

Cecilia af Forselles
Oral Tradition and the Press: Interaction between Periphery
and Academic Centre in 18th-Century Finland 50

Yuri Cowan
Orality, Authenticity, and the Historiography of the Everyday:
The Ballad in Victorian Scholarship and Print Culture 74

Kyrre Kverndokk
Disciplining the Polyphony of the Herbarium:
The Order of Folklore in the Norwegian Folklore Archives 92

Kirsti Salmi-Niklander
Ideals, Practices and Debates Related to Oral Tradition
in 19th-Century Finnish Student Culture 111

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin
Books, Manuscripts and Orality: Notes on Reading, Writing
and Narrating in Irish 127

Marija Dalbello
Threshold Text and the Metaphysics of Writing 146

Contributors 168
Abstract 170
Name Index 171

Yuri Cowan

Orality, Authenticity, and the Historiography of the Everyday: The Ballad in Victorian Scholarship and Print Culture

The narrative ballad is a form of song defined by its oral delivery, but it is a paradox of its dissemination that most extant ballad collections – both those for popular consumption and those intended as works of scholarship – stem largely from printed sources. This is particularly true of those that became part of the ballad canon in the Victorian era, when the ballad was particularly loved and respected by a mainstream reading audience that thought of it as an artefact of the popular oral culture of the past. Most of the ballad collections of that era were in fact compiled at second or third hand from the canons that had already been established by Thomas Percy, Walter Scott, and others. And yet the paratexts of those collections (introductions extolling the roots of the ballad in improvisation and song, frontispieces showing eager medieval audiences raptly listening to a harper) unanimously pay homage to the ballad as an oral performance. There is little doubt that the editors and readers of those collections shared an assumption that the ballad as it appeared on the printed page was the authentic artefact of a British folk culture of oral composition and performance.

Drawing on the history of editorial and epitextual performances by editors and scholars from Percy through to Frederick Furnivall, John W. Hales, and Francis James Child, as well as on the claims and assumptions made by 18th- and 19th-century editors regarding the authenticity, poetic value, and cultural significance of ballad oral composition, this article will examine the causes and consequences of this Victorian infatuation with ballad literature. Although the written word had historically held more authority than the fleeting performance or utterance, editors such as Samuel Carter Hall, William Allingham, and Furnivall now used the topos of oral composition variously to justify a patriotic reading of the ballads, to provide an excuse to edit for literary merit, and to argue for the ballads as a body of documentary evidence conveying authentic detail regarding the everyday life of the past (what Francis Gummere would later call the "journalistic ballad"). Scholarly and mass-market ballad anthologies alike drew on both printed and oral versions, but always placed a premium upon the oral composition of the ballads, relying paradoxically upon the ballads' perceived status as genuine creations of the "folk" to lend authority to editorial intervention.

We have quite a bit of scholarship on how the antiquarians and classicists of the 18th century saw the relation between orality and print. The 19th century has been less thoroughly covered in the secondary literature, but Victorian scholars too engaged with the implications of oral composition for the printed form of ballad texts. In that period, editors may have been less enamoured of the idea that ballad anthologies should capture "pure" oral performances, at least in part because many of them were editing for a broader public that was particularly a reading audience. And yet they too were often eager to exploit the notion of oral performance. There were several reasons for this. First, because the place of performance was often envisioned as being in the home or at work – and there likeliest in a rural setting which was viewed as conservative and closer to the folkways of the pre-industrial past – Victorian scholarship felt that the ballads could reveal something about the everyday lives of past men and women. This historiography of the everyday played out not only in an understanding of the roles of song and entertainment in everyday life, but also in the matter of ballads themselves, which was thought to reveal a rough but honest morality (Hall 1842, ii) as well as many of the customs, usages, and material culture surrounding marriage, death, conflict, and friendship. Second, the fact of the ballad's oral performance was itself picturesque and appealed to a sense of nostalgia. In the paratexts to ballad collections throughout the century, the pattern emerges of a frontispiece showing a singer in a domestic setting, paired with an introduction that makes a claim for the patriotic or "folk" nature of the ballads. Finally, this evocation of an oral performance for the ballad reinforced the relationship between individual genius (the composer of the ballad) and the collective, which under this model made subtle adjustments to the ballad text in performance. These adjustments were recorded not only in the performances which ballad scholars had seen and sometimes recorded in the field, but especially in the more permanent forms of text, either as manuscript or as print.

Elsewhere I have distinguished between Victorian ballad collections from fieldwork and ballad "anthologies" extracted at second or third hand for popular consumption (Cowan & Demoor 2012). It is important to recognize that the former were painstaking, usually localized efforts with a limited reach of publication; the most successful ballad anthologies – the ones most reprinted, the ones printed in the largest numbers, those which Victorian reading audiences with enough money were buying (the lower classes were still accessing the broadside ballad, which is another subject entirely) – were drawn from printed sources. One great paradox of the post-Romantic reception of the ballad, as William St. Clair has noted (2004, 346), was that it was framing a print tradition as an oral one. Among other things, we need to ask: how precisely did Victorian scholarship view the oral nature of the ballad and its relationship to print, and how did that perception filter down into the multiple apparatuses that framed Victorian ballad collections for the reading public? The editors of the most popular collections, after all, relied heavily on conversations between scholars such as Ritson and Percy, Scott and Hogg, Furnivall and Hales, and Child and his international network–conversations that had taken place largely in the print world of

19th-century literary and periodical culture. I hope that my discussion here of the Victorian understanding of the ballads' relation to oral culture can begin in part to answer the important challenge posed by Mary Ellen Brown in her important and thoughtful 2006 article "The Ballads' Progress," which considers the cultural status of the ballad from its first appearance as an object of literary importance on up to the present day:

> While the collective framing narratives might be called the literary history of the popular ballad, it is clear that this literary history itself needs to be re-examined and critiqued; while its pronouncements and assumptions may have no basis in fact, they have yet influenced the generic definitions of the ballad. In other words, the framing narratives have helped to form generic ideas about the ballad which may well reflect a particular cultural context. While "true" to that time and place, the ideas may well be dead wrong, or incomplete at best. (Brown 2006, 119).

Among the most prominent of these "collective framing narratives" was that of the ballad's oral provenance, either to claim the ballad as a popular entertainment for ordinary people or to draw attention to its status as a public performance. This oral status of the ballad was reiterated in various forms in 19th-century ballad scholarship and commentary. Philip Sidney's pronouncement that "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I heard not my heart moved more than with a trumpet, and yet it is sung but by some blind crowder, with no rougher voice than rude style," for instance, finds itself invoked in multiple defences of the ballad's canonical status, while nearly every ballad collection of the 19th century is possessed of a frontispiece that shows a minstrel performing before an appreciative public or private audience (as, for instance, the frontispiece to Samuel Carter Hall's lavish 1842 collection, or George Barnett Smith's from 1881).

Walter Ong suggests that the Romantic movement marks "the beginning of the end of the old orality-grounded rhetoric" (Ong 2002 [1982], 158). What then is the consequence for the Victorian period – the first industrial era of print – that accordingly formed the transitional period? Surely their attitude towards orality (manifested as what Ong calls "typographic bias" or, conversely, as the development of folklore studies as a special discipline) must have affected their theories of how ballads were understood to have been created. In relation to the era's increasing consciousness of high and low culture, the ballad offered a site where what we might now call a "highbrow" reading audience could embrace the productions of an apparently low culture; the antiquarians had tested it and proclaimed it safe, and the Romantic poets had made it interesting. Thus the romanticization of the minstrel figure (McLane 2008) or the multiple instances of a declaiming or singing bard that we find in the frontispieces of the many ballad collections published throughout the century at considerable remove from the ballads' putative origins in oral culture (Cowan & Demoor 2012). There was still a sense that oral composition took place in a special space; almost immediately as orality began to feel like a distant reality it became worthy of study. And yet how did the Victorians think that oral composition was carried out in practice? In a way their views are hard for us to recover without resorting

to our own intellectual biases and understandings of how oral composition worked and works. 19th-century scholars and editors were, after all, writing before Milman Parry and Albert Lord. To understand their theories of the relationship between orality and print culture, we need to return to the textual, antiquarian, and classical scholarship of the 18th century.

Textual performances: Between print and oral culture

Classical scholarship was from the very beginning a program of textual recovery, dealing as it did with works that had long been communicated through the often-fragmentary or incomplete manuscript word. It has been said that the prestige of the classics was based on the authority of letters as apparently fixed forms; but the real source of this apparent relationship between prestige, literacy, and the authoritative text was already more complicated than that. At any rate, the late 18th century marks the moment when cracks began to appear in the veneer of authority that the written word had lent extant classical literature. Hudson describes Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (1769) as being "the first sustained argument that Homer belonged to an 'oral tradition.'" (Hudson 2002, 251). Wood, says Hudson, "portrayed the peculiar beauties of Homer not as the fruits of literate refinement but of untrammelled [sic] nature." (*Ibid.*).[1] This sort of phrasing participates not only in the Romantic discourses on orality described by Maureen McLane (and which would later be reiterated by Victorian editors such as Hales), but also strikingly within the discourse of the divide between orality and print, or "nature" and "refinement." Indeed, it is reminiscent of the 18th-century school of criticism surrounding Shakespeare that suggested he was, in Ben Jonson's words, "the child of nature". Given Shakespeare's own roots in performance, the relationship of Jonson's characterization to an implicit theory of orality is not so far-fetched as it might first appear. Perhaps we might take this theory further, and suggest that for the 18th century and especially the Romantic

1 Ong 2002 [1982], 19: "The nineteenth century saw the development of the Homeric theories of the so-called Analysts, initiated by Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824), in his 1795 *Prolegomena*. The Analysts saw the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as combinations of earlier poems or fragments, and set out to determine by analysis what the bits were and how they had been layered together. But, as Adam Parry notes, (1971, xiv–xvii), the Analysts assumed that the bits being put together were simply texts, no alternative having suggested itself to their minds."

> Or, as Adam Parry puts it in his introduction to his father's notes (ix–lxii),
> The dominant movement of this period of scholarship was that of the Analysts, that is, of those who, in one way or another, saw our texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as combinations of earlier poems or fragments of poems. Their theories all rested on one assumption, an assumption which, because it was so fundamental, was never clearly stated by any of them. This was that there existed, previous to Homer, an 'original' text, or 'original' texts, of the Homeric epics, which either were written, or were possessed of the fixed form which only a written text can provide (xiv).

era, orality represented a mode of composition that was not mechanical, but organic. Again drawing on Shakespeare as an example, and considering the multiple conflicting testimonials to his precise words, of which Victorian scholars like Furnivall (who very intentionally spelled the author's name "Shakspere") were quite aware, it is possible that even in print composition had long been considered a social practice rather than the work of an individual improvising composer or author.

Penny Fielding, in *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction*, argues that literacy was a point of cultural capital, especially in Scotland, which "was promoting a version of orality which was in the hands – or the pens – of highly self-consciously [sic] literary figures" (Fielding 1996, 46). A work like Scott's *Minstrelsy*, she argues, enacted "the uneasy splitting-off of the written from the spoken" (*Ibid*., 47). Quite apart from this, however, 19th-century editors began to theorize the importance of maintaining as precisely as possible the form of the ballads as they had earlier been collected, whether written down or printed. Folkloric collecting in the centuries before audio recording after all had to manifest its findings in the only medium available to it, which was necessarily textual, although it manifested itself in diverse forms, from the informal written collection that would later be known as the Percy Folio MS, to the more systematic records of Motherwell, to the printed broadside collections compiled by bibliophiles and enthusiasts. The material permanence of print or manuscript relative to the spoken word was a matter of record and not necessarily at all times a value judgment.

The Victorian editor-scholars were in their element when dealing with the extant relics of this social practice; they were first-rate organizers, cataloguers, and editors of the profuse documents of the past. Their editorial theory had assimilated from manuscript studies the notion that ballads had been formed from numerous versions, so the editors did not feel the need always to be precisely faithful to their badly-spelled and sometimes seemingly arhythmical sources, especially when they were being re-edited for popular consumption. Different 19th-century editors approached this issue in slightly different ways, however, alternately printing them as parallel-text editions, eclectic texts, or composite texts. Their editing practices may even be said to represent similar approaches to the way in which collectors have seen oral texts, sometimes as representing singular performances in their respective historical moments and sometimes as representing performances with the influence and cultural weight of past performances upon them. It is important to remember that, in an age before the mechanical reproduction of sound, the printed or scribal text was the only available method of capturing the moment of performance (if, indeed, the voice recording itself can truly be considered a faithful reproduction). We must at least consider the possibility that even ballad editors who were engaged in recension-like pursuit of an authentic or best version (though not, of course, when they were amalgamating different versions) felt that they were reconstructing or preserving authentic performances in the best medium available to them.

Authorial intention was not much of an obstacle for Victorian editorial theory when it came to the ballads, although many editors felt the need

to grapple with it, if only to elevate the bard or minstrel to the status of a cultural icon comparable to the celebrity author of the print-obsessed 19th century. From the 1803 review of Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in the *Monthly Review* that repeatedly lamented the lack of names of authors for the ballads (Anonymous 1803, 25), through Robert Chambers's theory that Lady Wardlaw was the 17th-century author of ballads such as "Sir Patrick Spens" (cited in Brown 2006, 122), on up to George Barnett Smith's (1881) edition that organized the ballads along with literary attempts at the form only in alphabetical order by title, the 19th-century discourse becomes increasingly at ease with the anonymity of the creators of the ballads. This was partly because the editor had taken over the public custody of the ballad text and, as have I argued elsewhere (Cowan & Demoor 2012), was exploiting the apparent anonymity of the canonical ballads to underscore his own taste in compiling the "best" versions of the "best" ballads. But it also bespeaks an intellectual milieu that was becoming used to the idea that composition for oral performance was somehow distinct from writing for a literate audience. Thus it is possible to suggest that even as orality according to Ong's definition was retreating from public notice, and even (or especially) as the profession of print authorship was growing more celebrated, 19th-century scholarship and popular understanding grew more and more comfortable with the notion that not every fine or memorable poem or song need be traced to a single talented minstrel composer. As we shall see, even when such an authorial presence was invoked, the presence of previous performers, collectors, editors, and printers served to undermine it. No doubt this realization was a relief to editors confronted with the bewildering variety of ballad versions.

The idea of the single author, then, often had to give way to a vision of something like a collective enterprise working on the ballad corpus, refining it, shaping it, and re-presenting it to suit the historical moment. What Brown has described as the homogenous "folk society of early antiquarian dreams" (Brown 2006, 120) was not only a social, anthropological, or national space, it was also a textual space, where different hands contributed at different times to the received text of a song. Thus it would be possible to live in what Ong would call a typographically biased culture, and yet still subscribe to a theory that celebrated the more organic and improvisatory nature of oral composition. Indeed, it might be an important point to make here that the Victorians are generally little concerned with the formal or formulaic aspects of oral culture; for them a more important factor was the way in which it revealed the history of everyday life. It was left to the later work of [Vladimir] Propp, [Antti] Aarne and [Stith] Thompson, and Parry himself to approach folklore and the visible relics of preliteracy with an eye to unraveling their structural features. This historiography of the everyday relied on the documents of the past for its evocation of the ordinary lives and entertainment of past generations. But those documents were partial, and as soon as they entered the realm of preservation in paper and ink they began to split into multiple versions and splintered perspectives on songs that everyone thought they knew. Even as everyday life began to be better documented, the very profusion of those documents threatened the attempt to define it.

It turned out, then, that although there are in fact very few moments in history when ballad scholarship has consciously privileged print over the oral, print was still a necessity for the preservation of old song, yet print culture simultaneously served, threatened, and confused the custodians of the popular culture of the past. To give one well-known example, James Hogg's mother objected to his collecting the ballads in print, saying famously that "there was never ane o' my songs prentit till ye prentit them yoursell, an' ye hae spoilt them a'thegither. They war made for singing, an' no for reading; and they're nouther right spelled nor right setten down" (Hogg 1972, 62). Her complaint has been frequently cited in ballad scholarship. And yet throughout the 19th century her words appear most often in a spirit of nostalgia rather than in an effort to parse their true import. Hogg's mother is pointing out the inaccuracies attendant upon the editing and printing process as much she argues for inherent definitiveness in the oral performance (the latter, as we shall see, was the basic assumption of ballad scholarship for editors such as Child).

Paula McDowell similarly positions the 18th-century discourse on ballads as somewhat less biased in favour of print than we might expect, noting that for instance Thomas Percy, "Like Ong, […], modeled historic communications developments as in some ways *de*volutionary. In his scenario, ancient minstrels and their successors, modern balladmongers, are not participants in one continuous artistic tradition; rather, the institutionalization of the commercial press contributed to the 'extinct[ion]' of an earlier (and superior) cultural practice based on voice" (McDowell 2010, 36), although elsewhere she notes by way of contrast Percy's elitist positioning of the minstrel and Joseph Ritson's suggestion that the printed ballad was the primary location where popular song could be preserved. It is hard to say whether Percy for instance truly thought of the earlier practice of oral composition as "superior" to written composition, although he certainly valued it. He seems at least to have taken for granted the civilizing function of print. In his "Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels" that opens the first volume of the *Reliques*, he suggests that

> When the Saxons were converted to christianity, in proportion as letters prevailed among them, […] poetry was no longer a peculiar profession. The Poet and the Minstrel became two persons. Poetry was cultivated by men of letters indiscriminately, and many of the most popular rhimes were composed amidst the leisure and retirement of monasteries. But the Minstrels continued a distinct order of men, and got their livelihood by singing verses to the harp, at the houses of the great. […] And indeed tho' some of them only recited the compositions of others, many of them still composed songs themselves, and all of them could probably invent a few stanzas on occasion. I have no doubt but most of the old heroic ballads in this collection were composed by this order of men. […] From the amazing variations, which occur in different copies of these old pieces, it is evident they made no scruple to alter each other's productions, and the reciter added or omitted whole stanzas, according to his own fancy or convenience. (Percy 1765, vol. 1, xv–xvi).

Percy's words here are striking in that they frankly avow his reliance on "copies of these old pieces" for the recognition of the mutability of ballad texts over time. Mary Ellen Brown suggests that Percy's "discourses on the pre-history of English literature gave the ballads an author, the minstrels ('literature' must have author and thereby a period location), and the objects themselves pride of place, privileging the manuscript over orality as source" (Brown 2006, 116). And yet in this passage Percy seems rather to display a more equable sense of an interrelation between oral performance and textual preservation; after all, he seems to be concluding that the alterations, which come first in the process of "recitation," are manifested in textual form.

The Victorian ballad scholars never doubted that the ballads partook of a popular oral tradition; their discourse is shot through with the rhetoric of oral performance and adaptation. And yet for them the ballads' histories were still textual in form, even if in performance they were thought of as sung. The typographical bias we find in Percy is necessarily implicit in Victorian ballad collections – after all, whichever version an editor like Allingham would choose as somehow best or definitive, he would ultimately always be choosing from among textual versions and not copying from oral recitation – and yet there is a strong sense of nostalgia for an apparently preliterate culture. This they inherited from the Romantic scholarship of William Motherwell, Walter Scott, and James Hogg. Motherwell's dedication to collecting from oral sources was the first systematic self-conscious attempt to do so. Scott, as collector of both print and oral tradition, was entrenched in antiquarian notions of authentic ancient texts as representing the authentic historical lives of the folk. Hogg was in the same vein an antiquarian, although he differed in being dissatisfied with his contemporaries, including even his friend Scott, for treating oral testimony as unreliable when it came to the editing of ballads (see Gilbert 2009). Indeed, as his literary works, including the famous *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, show, Hogg had a laudable suspicion of the written record. Textual fidelity to speech, then, was tenuous, but it was all that 19th-century scholarship had if it wished to preserve its favourite examples of the fluid ballad tradition.

Furnivall and Hales: Establishing the Percy Folio MS

In a similar vein, that great 19th-century project of lexicographical scholarship the *New [Oxford] English Dictionary on Historical Principles* necessarily relied for its evidence on the textual tradition and not on preserved oral examples of dialect and usage, as the British Library, mimicking earlier 20th-century large-scale attempts at the preservation of spoken English, has recently attempted to do with its Evolving English exhibition and archive[2]. The establishment in 1864 of the Early English Text Society (EETS), with its inclusive mandate to recover, edit and publish as many of the texts of medieval and Early Modern English as possible, was intended to provide a quarry for the gems, semiprecious stones, and gravel of English speech

2 http://www.bl.uk/evolvingenglish/mapabout.html

and usage. The driving force behind the society, as behind so many other Victorian societies devoted to the preservation and editing of past texts, was the indefatigable Frederick James Furnivall. The EETS's broad mandate to publish the ordinary textual artefacts of the past – from wills and dietaries to guild statutes and romances – was intended to reveal the popular culture of the past in all its diversity and with its power, quirks, and failings intact.

It was in the context of this kind of textual and philological scholarship that Furnivall and his fellow editor John Hales set out to establish and print the text of the famous manuscript that Thomas Percy had rescued from oblivion and which had formed the basis for his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* one hundred years before. The fact that Hales and Furnivall thought that it was at all important to set the record straight with regard to Percy's "original" texts was itself significant. This push to publish the Percy Folio MS was in part encouraged by Francis James Child, working at Harvard University across the Atlantic, who, as Mary Ellen Brown writes in "Child's Ballads and the Broadside Conundrum," felt the importance of getting as far back behind the printed versions as possible. In Furnivall's "Forewords" [sic] to the edition, he begins by pointing out that Child was the one who insisted that the book should be published as a "foundation document of English balladry, the basis of that structure which Percy raised, so fair to the eyes of all English-speaking men throughout the world" (Hales & Furnivall 1867, vol. 1, ix). Furnivall's praise, however, is not exactly unstinting, since he makes it clear that the intention of the volume is also to make up for the ways in which Percy had in the texts of the *Reliques* misrepresented the actual contents of his folio manuscript. It was certainly true that Percy had interfered substantially with the texts of the ballads as they were received, and the diligence of an editor, even one as notoriously hasty as Furnivall, was welcome in recovering for a modern antiquarian audience the unique 17th-century versions that the Percy Folio MS preserved. But the three-volume *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript* was fuelled by more than just the desire to set the editorial record straight (as Furnivall says in his introduction, "to tell the truth, and tell the whole truth, of a text or MS. is an editor's first duty," *Ibid*., xx). It may even be more than an attempt to seek a primal text, an authentic oral performance encoded in a relatively reliable but still incompletely authentic manuscript form that later was reshaped out of recognition by print[3]. As the editorial paratexts, and the introductions in particular, show, the edition was intended to reposition the historical manuscript itself, in its own time and place, as an artefact both of its composition and its reception.

In their introductions, Hales and Furnivall describe the physical form of the manuscript and write its history in terms of a process of reception and re-creation, working to evoke the worldview equally of the composing minstrel, of the antiquarian preserver of the songs, and of Percy himself. So in his "Forewords" Furnivall describes at length the various challenges

3 It is possible that Child's geographical isolation from the residual insular spaces of oral performance led him to assume still more reliability for the oral than many of his contemporaries in Great Britain did.

posed by Joseph Ritson, that fierce advocate of textual fidelity, to Percy, and takes it for granted that Ritson was correct to make those challenges. It was not enough, however, that the publication of Hales and Furnivall's print edition of the Percy Folio MS was intended to right the wrongs of Percy's transgressions against the manuscript. It was important to them that they reflect on the reasons Percy had for interpolating modern ballads, and for cleaning up the most graphic episodes, such as the rape in "Glasgerion." As the title of Hales's essay on "The Revival of Ballad Poetry in the Eighteenth Century" suggests, they were engaged in historicizing the social and textual situation of the ballads at various times – their scholarship was intended to recover moments of reception that were not necessarily the vaguely medieval or Early Modern period with which we often assume the Victorians associated the ballad.

So, for instance, Hales in his introduction situates the *Reliques* as a production of the polite 18th century. Like Furnivall and Child, he considers the modern pieces added by Percy to be a problematic intervention. He has very little positive to say about them:

> […] Such were the pieces whose elegance was to make atonement to the readers of a century ago, for the barbarousness of the other components of the *Reliques*.
>
> This barbarousness was further mitigated by an application of a polishing process to the ballads themselves. Percy performed the offices of a sort of tireman for them. He dressed and adorned them to go into polite society. To how great an extent he labored in their service, is now at last manifested by the publication of the Folio. (Hales & Furnivall, vol. 1, 1867, xxiv).

The *Reliques* in Hales's view – and in that of any proponent of the primacy of orality over print in this branch of popular culture – were "dressed and adorned," augmented, polished, and made to rub elbows with ahistorical imitations of a later date. And yet all this does not mean that Hales felt that the style of the ballads was a non-issue. In spite of his and Furnivall's apparent dedication to publishing and preserving the ballads in the Percy Folio MS in as faithful a state as they could, Hales himself in his introductions is critical of the style of many of the ballads. In introducing the ballad of "Hugh Spencer" ("It is no considerable addition to English literature. It gives, with average dullness, a ridiculously bragging account of the achievements of one Sir Hugh Spencer at the court of France, whither he was dispatched as ambassador"), he resorts to suggesting the lowness of the song's originator as the source of the poem: "What a vulgar Philistine was this ballad-monger!" (Hales & Furnivall 1867, vol. 2, 290). Elsewhere, Hales suggests that the composition process may possibly have involved perfecting original narratives, as when he writes of "Eglamore" that "The minstrel who wrote, or rather translated, this piece, if a minstrel he was, as verses 1227–9 might suggest, told an old tale freshly" (*Ibid.*, 339). Although Hales worked hard to maintain an editorial equanimity in the face of the diversity of textual versions that confronted him, his sense of taste, which had been shaped in a literary rather than an oral milieu, never deserted him.

For all his criticism of Percy's interventions, in Hales's view they agreed on the individual creativity of the minstrel (or, in less complimentary moments, of a "ballad monger" like the implied author of "Hugh Spencer" above). But they could not precisely trace his identity, nor even his occupation; they had to adjust their theories to accommodate the anonymous everyday voices of past songsters. This accounts for Hales's apparent reversal at the end of the essay, when he moves from critiquing Percy for his editorial and creative interventions to asserting that the ballads, in whatever form they survive and are published, and whoever their unknown authors are, are important in the history of *taste*. Hales's introduction culminates with the story of Walter Scott's first encounter with the *Reliques*; the description of Scott lost in rapture "beneath a huge plantanas tree" is emphatically the encounter of a reader with a book ("nor do I believe I ever read a book half so frequently or with half the enthusiasm" Hales & Furnivall 1867, vol. 2, xxxi). This is not entirely at odds with Hales's criticism of Percy for having performed a similar domestication of the ballad. The assertion of editorial or readerly taste in relation to the ballad was a common theme throughout the 19th century. It was more than just a residue of Percy's and Scott's own assertions that the ballad, though a product of a barbarous age, was an important part of the education of a modern chivalrous sensibility. Other editors (such as William Allingham, as recently as 1864) had even gone so far as to equate editorial interventions on the grounds of literary merit with the borrowings that occur in oral performance. For Hales, spontaneous, or at least relatively spontaneous, oral composition was an act that could result in a song that partook of the same aesthetic virtues as a poem in print.

But Percy, by way of contrast, may not have tried very hard to distinguish between written and oral composition. Nor was he perhaps even very conscious of the transition between song and manuscript. As he explains, "To atone for the rudeness of the more obsolete poems, each volume concludes with a few modern attempts *in the same kind of writing*" (Percy 1765, vol. 1, x, my emphasis). Percy's language is careless, and forgets the sung dimensions of the ballads; but it is possible as well that he saw written composition as working on the same principles as oral. For Hale, Percy's words indicate Percy's less-than-whole-hearted reverence for the ballads; but they may also suggest that Percy was engaging with the ballads on what he thought was equal ground: that of text. Percy's language when describing the state of his ballads and MS is on the one hand literary (marking for instance their "rudeness" here) and, on the other, equally often material ("these old writings have, as might be expected, been handed down to us with less care, than any other writings in the world," *Ibid*., xii). Implicitly, Percy was compensating for apparent deficiencies of rhythm and metre and language by suggesting carelessness on the part of the transcriber, as well as on that of the composer. The notoriously fragmentary state of the manuscript was for Percy indicative of carelessness of preservation as well as of the roughness of the ballad composer's talent.

Francis James Child and the pressures of print

In his 1867 essay, then, John Hales opposes the "spontaneity" of the ballad to the "polish" that for him defines the taste of the Enlightenment. This is distinctive language that suggests an opposition of nonce oral improvisation to the putative careful revision inherent in printed forms. Rather than replicate the "typographic bias" described by Ong, Hales gushes over the ballads' positive attributes: as he describes it, "in the midst of conventionalisms and artificialities, Simplicity and Truth asserted themselves" (Hales & Furnivall 1867, vol. 2, xviii). This is the Victorian manifestation of that shift to resistance against "typographic bias" that would culminate in the more measured conclusions of Ong and of his tutor Marshall McLuhan. However, Victorian scholarship, for all its desire to valorise oral tradition as honest, aesthetically pleasing, and revelatory of popular history, could not entirely relinquish its base in the printed or manuscript word. When Hales evokes the ballad corpus as being made up of "songs dear to the hearts of the common people – songs whose power was sometimes confessed by the higher classes, but not so thoroughly appreciated as to induce them to exert themselves for their preservation" (*Ibid*., vii), he is not so much replicating Ong's typographical bias as he is acknowledging the virtues of print as a preservative.

Indeed, one wonders if in the ages before it was possible to record voices it was at all possible to have such a positive reflection on the value of oral culture as Ong gives us. The longing for stability, permanence, and preservation of utterance is understandable; the intimate linking of such preservation with the "higher classes" that Hales makes here, is also significant. But the witnesses for the ballad corpus that print provided were diverse, fragmentary, and quite at odds with the orderly and convincing world of type. It is significant and ironic, but perhaps unsurprising, that Hales's portrayal of the "Simplicity and Truth" of an apparently oral tradition coincides so closely [data of publication] with the apex of the first great age of the industrialization of print. Nicholas Hudson notes in a similar vein with reference to the previous century that "as European society became *more* literate, it gained an ever sharper awareness of oral cultures and their special characteristics" (Hudson 2002, 241), and with exponentially increased literacy the process would only continue to accelerate.

This undercurrent of reaction against print was not only based on an elevation of the oral as closer to the pure originary source of the sung ballad, but also founded on a spirit of suspicion very like that articulated by Hales above for the more grubby and anarchic milieu of the balladmonger. Certainly Francis James Child, compiler of the most thorough 19th-century collection of ballads, saw the broadside ballads as being inferior to those that circulated in oral tradition (according to McDowell 2010, 54). This was another reversal of Ong's "typographic bias," though one that was at times equally problematic. As Mary Ellen Brown (2010, 70) puts it in her article "Child's Ballads and the Broadside Conundrum," "When [Child] used the word 'popular' in the title of his critical edition, he meant 'traditionary,' that is, material that was old, circulating orally, and variable." As she points out,

in many cases broadsides were the oldest texts that Child had, and yet he was sometimes still loath to include them. Thus, in spite of the fact that his was necessarily a textual project, Child instinctively overcompensated for the typographical bias that he had perceived in his own literary milieu. This was partly due to his Romantic sense of nostalgia and partly to what Brown notes as his roots in the "comparative philological tradition of the Brothers Grimm" (Brown 2006, 116).

Child's print database of ballads was not an insignificant project, comprising as it did not only the famous massive and eventually posthumous ten-volume set of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898), but also its precursor, the eight smaller volumes of *The English and Scottish Ballads* (1857–1858) for the Little, Brown British Poets series. Child's magnum opus, for all that it may have left out so many extant broadside versions, was an exercise in completism, including multiple versions of each ballad. Like the diversity of texts published by the Early English Text Society, and having in common with it that desire to provide a corpus for the exercise of comparative philology, Child's ballad collection embodied a significant material outlay in paper, ink, and the other costs attendant on publishing such a major work of comparative scholarship. Although not what we would now term "crowd-sourced" (as the much larger EETS's series were), *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* gathered together the efforts of multiple collectors and editors from the previous hundred and fifty years of ballad scholarship. The fifteen different versions of Child ballad number 12, "Lord Rendal," for instance, stem from sources as various as the Hales and Furnivall printed edition of the Percy Folio MS, Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, Motherwell's diligent collecting, other printed editions such as those of James Orchard Halliwell, and diverse sources collected from recitation by local amateurs and by Child himself.

It is as though Child, by collecting as many diverse versions in one place as possible (a kind of Smithsonian Folkways Collection carried out when print was the only medium for preserving the performance) was attempting to reassure himself of the simultaneous individual diversity and social homogeneity of the culture which had given rise to the ballads. As he writes in his entry on "Ballad Poetry" for *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia*,

> The primitive ballad, then, is popular not in the sense of something arising from and suited to the lower orders of a people. As yet, no sharp distinction of high and low exists in respect to knowledge, desires, and tastes. An increased civilization, and especially the introduction of book-culture, gradually gives rise to such a division; the poetry of art appears; the popular poetry is no longer relished by a portion of the people, and is abandoned to an uncultivated or not over-cultivated class – a constantly diminishing number. (Child 1881, 365).

The popular or everyday ballad culture of the past, then, for Child had been at first evenly spread among classes, and it was the advance of literacy itself that had tended to create cultural elites and to upset the balance between individual and shared enjoyment. But this same evolving situation had, according to him, also an effect on the material form in which the ballad

text was preserved, in terms of its consistency with older forms, in terms of its polish, and in terms of its relationship to both archaic and contemporary language:

> Next it must be observed that ballads which have been handed down by long-repeated tradition have always departed considerably from their original form. If the transmission has been purely through the mouths of unlearned people, there is less probability of wilful change, but once in the hands of professional singers, there is no amount of change which they may not undergo. Last of all comes the modern editor, whose so-called improvements are more to be feared than the mischances of a thousand years […] In all cases the language drifts insensibly from ancient forms, though not at the same rate with the language of every-day life (Child 1881, 367).

This is a remarkable passage of Child's encyclopaedia entry on the ballad, since it evokes the philological connection that Furnivall and others had assumed between linguistic history and its manifestations over time in text and in performance, and makes explicit the importance of the ballad – marked here as existing in a space participating both in oral and in print culture – for documenting that connection. The agents of that documentation are in Child's view various, and they all have an effect on the extant forms of the ballad. Note for instance that for Child the uneducated repeater of a ballad is the most reliable or at least the most conservative, while the more educated the custodian of a ballad is, the more likely he or she is to make "improvements." The sort of editor Child has in mind here is someone like the poet William Allingham, who in the introduction to his 1864 collection remarked that "The ballads owe no little of their merit to the countless riddlings, siftings, shiftings, omissions, and additions of innumerable reciters. The lucky changes hold, the stupid ones fall aside" (Allingham 1864, viii), thereby complacently justifying his own eclectic editing practice.

Child, then, was a sort of latter-day Joseph Ritson, admonishing editors to edit as little as possible in order to maintain the philological and cultural integrity of the ballad. The material form of the ballad's preservation was at the heart of this enterprise, conveying as it did the most precise impression of the moment of oral performance – a problematic notion, of course, since even now neither an audio nor even a video recording can be said to convey more than a single perspective on that moment, as anyone can attest who has seen shaky cameraphone video on youtube of a concert he or she has attended, or sifted through the diverse audience recordings, each using different microphone technology and each from a different part of the auditorium, that document a single given Grateful Dead concert. And if, returning to the diverse manuscript and type witnesses to a ballad like "Lord Rendal" (or "Lord Rowlande," or "Lord Donald," or "Willy Doo", or "my little wee croudlin doo" – all, according to Child, legitimate alternative versions of the same title), we reconsider Child's project and that of the EETS, we find they have a lot in common with the performance archives and databases of our own era preserved in, for instance, the Internet Archive or, looking back seventy or eighty years, in the Mass Observation Project.

We also find, unsurprisingly, that their witnesses are bewilderingly various, and that they cannot be made entirely to support Child's utopian theory of editorial fidelity to the moment of performance, whatever kind or amount of documentation might be made possible by technology.

Michael J. Bell, who argues persuasively for the validity and indeed the importance of Child's article entry on ballads in *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia*, makes explicit the ways in which textual diversity, canonical aesthetic value, and historical significance are all linked in Child's expression of his theories in the entry. In Bell's view, Child felt that

> ballads are popular in the strict use of the word; they are the products of a people who deeply share the same worldview until it is broken by print, Protestantism, and science. What had been the property of all was left to those peasants untouched by the moral and intellectual revolutions that ended the high Middle Ages and the Renaissance and brought on the modern era. What is interesting is that Child wants to guarantee that his audience will acknowledge only certain texts as legitimate and only certain experiences as productive of popular poetry. (Bell 1988, 292).

We have already seen how complex the idea of a "legitimate" ballad text was and is; what is interesting here is how the difficulty of pinning down the best of those texts is linked to the influence of print and technology. Once again it appears that at the very same time as scholars, with their increased forensic skills and increased possibilities of dissemination, were able to exercise more and more control over the printed ballad canon, they began to value the oral as being more authentic, which in turn made them realize just how diverse and uncontrollable that canon was. Popular culture, come to the fore again, had had its revenge, undermining the scholars' efforts to pin it down.

The multiple forms of the popular ballad

The Edwardian poet Henry Newbolt, in a 1915 article for *The English Review*, sought to overwrite this individuality of text and concomitant textual instability with a national narrative. Drawing on the ballad scholar Francis Gummere, but with a view of authorial creativity shaped by the world of the celebrity author and by the apparent immutability of the print version, Newbolt sought to reassure the readers of *The English Review* that the received texts of the British ballad canon were the result of the workings of a benevolent evolutionary spirit:

> [T]hough a poem cannot be made by a committee working simultaneously, it may be made by a whole people working upon it in succession; and it will then represent or express not the obscure and forgotten individual who first roughed it out, but the view of life of the community which instinctively changed it to its own likeness.

> The ballads, then, after all, are not so wholly impersonal as some have thought them; by choice, by rejection, and by addition they have been made to set forth a personal view, and this they do as consistently as if they were all the compositions of a single author. The view is the view of a nation and not of an individual, but it does mingle regret and desire, it does re-create the world for us (Newbolt 1915, 465).

Newbolt, remembered as the poet of empire for works such as "Vitaï Lampada," suggests here a misty invisible hand at work, that of "the community," which works in "instinctive" ways. This is not the oral culture that we now understand from the work of Milman Parry and Walter Ong, made up of individual performers who often simultaneously recreate different versions of what is more or less the same song, using a shared hoard of words and phrases. Rather, Newbolt, like Allingham and others before him, imagines a sequential process, one that involves songs layering atop one another and improving, leading inevitably to a final best text. As Mary Ellen Brown wryly puts it,

> The beauty of all such totalizing theories is their global supposition, the answering of the unanswerable questions for all times: the ballads are a closed account; they were created in an earlier time and place where society was homogeneous – the folk society of early antiquarian dreams, the premodern haven (Brown 2006, 120).

And yet Newbolt in summarizing current thinking on the ballad for his mainstream reading audience seems to have missed some of the most important currents of 19th-century scholarship with regard to the ballads' manifestations in print and oral culture. As we have seen, writers such as Child had been troubled in far more productive ways when they were confronted by the diversity of ballad versions. The 19th-century desire to recover and to preserve as many documents as possible of the ordinary popular culture of the past suggests that, in contrast to what Brown says here, scholars such as Child, Hales, and Furnivall hoped to portray the ballad as an evocative document of unseen moments of past history, rather than to preserve its best exemplars in single authoritative forms. Here, too, their recognition of the diversity of these documents of popular entertainment may help us to understand how, historically, these scholars saw the everyday life of the past: not as an orderly evolution to a modern best of all possible worlds, but as a halting series of interesting byways followed, creative experiments abandoned, and shared successes passed on. All such attempts were worthy of documentation, no matter their aesthetic success by contemporary standards of literary merit.

Raphael Samuel poses an historiographical question in "Grand Narratives" that may be apposite here: "Does a more pluralist understanding of the present entail abandoning any unified view of the national past, and indeed, as some anti-racists argue, make any idea of a national past offensive? Does the abandonment of evolutionary schemes of development, and the discredit attaching to notions of historical 'destiny,' mean that the only safe subject to study is 'moments'?" (Samuel 1990, 124). This is a political problem

of historiography posed in a modern manner, but Victorian scholars were themselves interested in the ways in which the "moments" that Samuel evokes were attested to by the episodes of passion, conflict, and ordinary everyday ritual found in ballad narratives and in the diverse documents recovered and published by the Early English Text Society. Victorian scholars certainly came to the study of such moments from the view of the past that we see in Brown's evocation of "the homogeneous folk society of early antiquarian dreams." But they also recognized the vicissitudes of history and the textual variations that pulled the ballad canon away from being a unified celebration of a homogeneous national past. When Child agonized over the question of what constituted the best form of each of the ballads he studied, he was grappling with precisely this question of pluralism and perfectionism. The answer lay in the diversity of the very documents they were studying. The texts of the ballads were multiple witnesses to the popular culture of the past, not well reducible to a single canon comprising the best versions of each narrative. On the contrary, the record shows that the 19th-century ballad editors contributed most to our understanding of the history of popular culture when they imagined historical everyday life as being made up of diverse performative moments, and harnessed the era's considerable print resources to preserve the ballad corpus in all its profusion, with all its flaws and inconsistencies intact.

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