BALLADS

Of all the types of poetry, perhaps the one making the most **direct appeal to all classes of readers and listeners from the Middle Ages to our own day** is the **popular ballad**. It is essentially **a narrative poem**, that is, **a poem that tells a story**. And herein lies one of the reasons for its almost universal appeal; children and adults, educated and uneducated people, sophisticated and unsophisticated people-all like stories. And **the story in a ballad is usually stirring and dramatic**. It may range from a **domestic tragedy**-the killing of a husband by his wife or a father by his son, for example-to the recounting of **the deeds of a local, or even national, hero**. **Love, war, violent death, shipwreck, court intrigue-all find their place in ballad literature**. There are ballads about poor people and about fishermen and even highwaymen; there is a whole series of ballads about Robin Hood and his men. There are some humorous and some satirical ballads as well. The literary taste of the folk cannot be called sophisticated; there was little interest in, or understanding of, complex and subtle psychological processes. But stories of elemental emotion, stories of the lives and violent deaths of the great and the little known, **stories depending on folklore or belief in the supernatural made tremendous appeal**. People everywhere are moved by the tragic death of a young lover, stirred by deeds of bravery in battle, horrified by patricide, comforted by the justice that overtakes an evil ruler, amused by good natured squabbles between husband and wife.

One of the characteristics of the ballad is **its beginning close to (or even with) the climactic episode of the story**. Rarely is any background material given; rarely do we learn anything about the characters before the central event itself is told. Many ballads recounted stories well-known to their initial audiences; it was unnecessary to supply background material, to identify characters others than by their names or to identify a king other than by saying "the king." **The interest of the people was in the climactic event**; hence, the ballad most frequently began and ended with this event.

Also **distinctive is the movement of the narrative**. Essentially erratic in movement, **the ballad tells its story at times by leaps and bounds, so rapidly at times that parts of the story may be completely omitted**; at other times, the ballad may linger for as much as several stanzas over some part of the story. This characteristic of the ballad is again largely a result of **the process of composition and transmission**. Since a story - or at least **the event from which the story stemmed - was probably known to his initial audience**, the composer of the ballad was free to pass rapidly over or even omit those details that were not of particular interest to him, and more **fully develop those parts of the story that appealed most to him and to his audience**. And in the **process of oral transmission**, parts of the ballad are forgotten, resulting in leaping, and parts are enlarged or embroidered, resulting in lingering.

Dialogue-so natural and necessary a part of good story-telling is **a characteristic of many folk ballads**. Another frequent characteristic is **the use of repetition**. Sometimes **a line or two-a refrain-in some way related to the content is repeated after each stanza** or after each unit of several stanzas; sometimes **the refrain changes little by little (increment by increment)** as the content of the ballad is developed. (Such repetition has been called **incremental repetition**). In some ballads, the refrain consists merely of a series of nonsense syllables-with *a fal lal lal*, for example. In still other ballads, the story itself proceeds by means of incremental repetition: part of a stanza repeats the preceding stanza except for changes which carry the narrative forward.

Another marked characteristic of the folk ballad is **the objectivity with which the story is told**. The feelings and reactions of the composer (or composers) do not normally find any place in the ballad. **Interest is cantered on the story itself rather than on its effects on the teller.**

So many ballads are cast into a **four-line stanza of alternating four stress and three stress lines rhyming *abcb* that this stanza has come to be known as the ballad stanza**. Those ballads not composed in this stanza use one or another adaptation of it that is still essentially simple in structure.

Just as **the form is simple, so is the language**. And this is what we might expect, since **ballads originally were composed to be sung-frequently enough by the "folk" themselves** as well as by professional ballad singers-to essentially simple music. Ballads use the **vocabulary of everyday speech** with a generous sprinkling of stock images-milkwhite steed, red as blood, berry-brown sword. Dialogue does not normally distinguish between speakers, even though one may be a king and the other a commoner. Again, **since ballads are folk literature, we do not find highly figurative language**, learned allusions, or a highly literary vocabulary.

….

LITERARY BALLADS

Closely allied to the folk ballad is **the literary ballad**. Most simply considered, **the literary ballad is a poem written by a poet -a literary artist-in imitation of the folk ballad**. **It is not anonymously written nor is it transmitted orally from place to place and from generation to generation**.

Literary ballads usually tell a more complex story than popular ballads, perhaps involving **subtle and complex psychological processes and relationships**. The writer brings to his material all the techniques he commands as a poet-from highly connotative diction to figurative language, vivid imagery, and even symbolism. Yet he attempts to capture something of the flavour of the popular ballad. He may use dialogue, leaping and lingering, an abrupt beginning, even stock figures of speech.

The very characteristics which distinguish popular ballads from other kinds of narrative poetry prove valuable to poets interested in recounting certain types of story material. The **abrupt beginning**, for example, can make an **effective opening for many kinds of narrative**. Similarly, when artistically handled, **leaping and lingering** can be used for any number of narrative effects: for **rapidity of movement**, for **arousal of suspense through omissions of material**, for **emphasizing moments of tenseness or emotional appeal**, for **focusing on ideas**.

…

As an example of a **literary ballad, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*** tells a fascinating story of a ship that sails to remote uncharted parts of the world, that is ice-bound at one point and becalmed at the equator at another point, that comes under the dominion of supernatural powers. The poem has **much of the flavour of the popular ballad**. It opens abruptly as a strange-looking old seaman stops one of three men on their way to a wedding and almost hypnotically forces him to listen to his weird tale. **The narrative progresses rapidly**, making effective use of leaping and lingering. Here and there **obsolete words help establish an antique flavour**. The ballad stanza is used; so are occasional **stock figures of speech**; and the **introduction of the supernatural** is much in the tradition of the popular ballad. But the incidents are developed in far more detail than would be expected in a popular ballad; to the creation of scene after scene **rich in imagery the poet brings all the skills and techniques of a literary artist**. And the poem is more than just a stirring story: embodied in its narrative is significant philosophic content developed through **a complex system of symbols**. The eternal problem of the nature of evil is basic to the development of the plot.

There are many other types of poetic narrative. There is, first the **metrical romance**, a poem of considerable length whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. The characters are usually of the nobility and their behaviour follows the code of chivalry that we associate with King Arthur and his knights of the round table. **Plots are episodic and frequently include supernatural elements and fantastic adventures**. Keats' *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Tennyson's Arthurian poems, and E. A. Robinson's *Tristram* are well-known examples of the type. Earlier examples sought both to entertain, in describing a world where knights are fierce in combat against the forces of evil but gentle and longsuffering in their endeavours to win the favour of beautiful damsels, and to communicate ideas about good and evil, about human relations and modes of behaviour.

Just as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* represents the best in romances, so do some of his *Canterbury Tales* represent the best in short stories in poetry. The range of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests the range of narrative poetry. His fabliaux - *The Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales*, for example - centre about the lower classes of society, and supply a thoroughly realistic, detailed setting against which characters of tremendous vitality act out situations designed to make even a humourless reader laugh. His *Man of Law's Tale* is closely related to the medieval saint's lives-early biographies of the suffering and virtues of the saints. His *Nun's Priest's Tale* represents the large body of poetry-particularly in the Middle Ages-devoted to narratives whose characters are animals who talk. The satirical note found again and again in the Canterbury Tales reappears in the narratives of Dryden and Byron, to name only two later poets.

Romances, realistic short stories, biographical sketches, animal fables, and satirical commentary, then, can all be found in the range of then ballad.