



REFLECTIONS ON THE GATHERING Participatory Worlds

LEE BRICCETTI

Given the compacted force of twenty years of waiting, Penelope sees and doesn't see that Odysseus has returned. There is something both sly and necessary about her holding back, about the pitched tests which prepare her for a fuller recognition of the coming restoration. But what has been lost is lost.

The recognition scenes from epics like *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* give them a shape, like a clasp closing an enormous cape. There is always something in the epic about looking into the mirror of another human face and seeing unredeemable time. A leader dies. A kingdom fades.

In these ancient epics, time is always unmaking identity, and identity is not easily disentangled from the claims of—for lack of an equivalent term—country.

But let me take a step back. By "epic," I mean a long narrative poem that focuses on the exploits of a hero. And in these old poems, the hero cannot be conceived of without battle. Context is not everything, but a lot.

How much giddier the recognition scenes are in Shakespeare's comedies! The girls who have pretended to be boys reveal fuller identities *through* their disguises. They unmask only to take on what that era permits them in social power—a marriage. I've been thinking about them and about the recognitions in the ancient epics. Does anything of the epic remain in those girls? And...is there a female epic? A female hero? If so, what does she make possible?

This meditation is occasioned by my co-curation of this year's People's Poetry Gathering, which focuses on epics and ballads, on the narrative impulse in poetry, and asks what in the old stories still reaches us today? It is a tenet of the Gathering that poetry finds an audience in a variety of contexts and cultures as chant, as spiritual revelation, as voiced song, and as text. And that the shift from orality to writing alters the shape of consciousness. The oral epic, as Walter J. Ong writes, "has nothing to do with creative imagination in the modern sense of the term.... The oral song (or narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of the songs sung." The Gathering makes it possible to be in the presence of epic singers and purely oral poetries. For me personally, this interaction enlarges the practice of reading and writing and helps me understand the participatory world in which poetry grew (and still grows).

One of the jolts of recognition I feel in the presence of epics is how much remains. Even if we don't like it. I am talking now about the negative pole of our shared humanity—violence, mythologized violence, the amplitude of war.

And yet, between the modern reader and the ancient epic singer there must always be a concomitant distance and a gap.

If the *Odyssey's* audience had heard William James's statement—"There is no moral equivalent to war"—we can bet they wouldn't have understood it as the directive: "Don't fight." Something is always lost from our hearing when we hear out of context. But from my point of view, that is where the meanings are. Especially now, received on the brink of war, *Gilgamesh* seems to carry the entire freight of our history. Nonlinear and situated in loss, it augurs the brink of new consciousness. That consciousness can still come to us today, but it comes episodically, if at all.

Gilgamesh is one of the first human heroes. And the epic poem that bears his name is one of our oldest stories, from the third millennium B.C., set in what is now southern Iraq. Over the course of a marathon family gathering, I told my five-year-old nephew the Gilgamesh tale. He was rapt by their adventures and their altercations with the gods. He begged for more story. He loved the drama of Enkidu's death and Gilgamesh's orphic journey to the Underworld to find him. After the long travels, and stories set within stories, Gilgamesh returns home emptyhanded. But he has seen into his nature; he is humbled and ready to lead with compassion. My nephew was outraged: "You mean he ended up with nothing?"

Recognition grows slowly, like the music of the poem's beautiful refrain:

At twenty leagues they stopped only to eat.

At thirty leagues they stopped to rest for the night.

STEVE ZEITLIN

As a high school student, I found the thick literary anthologies our teachers gave us a bit daunting, but always took solace in the short, accessible, and anonymous ballads and medieval lyrics that found their way into those tomes. I was struck by the traditional ballads, songs that told a story, such as “Sir Patrick Spence,” one of the oldest recorded in the English language:

The king has written a braid letter,
And signd it wi his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,
Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
A loud lauch lauched he;
The next line that Sir Patrick red,
The teir blinded his ee....

“Late, late, yestreen I saw the new moone,
Wi the auld moone in hir arme,
And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
That we will cum to harme.”

My interest soon expanded to the poets who drew heavily on the ballad form, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge and Yeats. And in those years, I first heard the folk ballads that were being revived by singers such as Joan Baez and Peter, Paul, and Mary. Those experiences inspired me to enroll in a Ph.D. program in folklore. It was there that I became aware of the ballad’s presence in many parts of the world. I also became aware of the vast effort made to collect these sung stories.

According to Bertrand Harris Bronson, “It was Lord Hailes who transmitted to [Bishop] Percy the now famous copies of... ‘Sir Patrick Spens,’ which appeared a decade later in the *Reliques* (1765). But it was countless persons, in all walks of life, who were singing them shaping and reshaping them more to their liking as they sang.” As a student in high school, I’m not sure I was quite aware that these poems were sung—until an eccentric teacher in my senior year began bringing his guitar to school and teaching his class to sing them at the end of each period. Studying folklore, I began to realize that these texts belonged to songs, and ultimately to the audiences who carried them on in the process of oral tradition, and that the texts changed and affected each performance. As I began to work in what is called “public folklore,” finding new ways to collaborate with traditional artists and present this work, I came to realize that I was playing a creative role in the process of transmission. The work of folklorists brought traditional artists into contact with new audiences, often with shared (but sometimes with divergent) interests and aesthetics from those who sang the songs.

The People's Poetry Gathering likewise plays a creative role in the process of transmission, following in the distant footsteps of those who first set down epics and ballads. To quote the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, the Gathering strives to "lift the great song again." Some of the early chroniclers were Christian scribes who set down the words of "pagans" in epics such as *Beowulf* in England (medievalist and musicologist Benjamin Bagby has reconstructed the music of the British epic on period instruments and will be performing at the Gathering). Later scholars were those interested in documenting the heritage of their nascent countries—such as Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884), who collected Finnish epic stories and songs to show that Finland had as great a folk heritage as the Greeks. (The *Kalevala* will be performed at the Gathering.)

This year's Gathering will also feature a tribute to one of the great "ballad hunters," the pioneering folklorist Alan Lomax. Alan's father John was a student at Harvard taking courses in European ballads and folksongs at the turn of the century. But he left school to collect "American" folklore, returning to Texas and publishing a collection of cowboy songs in 1910. With a tape recorder weighing over two hundred pounds in the trunk of their car, John and Alan Lomax drove the backroads of the American south, beginning in the 1930s, recording bluesmen such as Leadbelly and Muddy Waters and adding immeasurably to this nation's heritage of folk music and poetry. When Alan Lomax passed away last year, his obituary on the front page of the *Times* quoted him as saying:

We now have cultural machines so powerful that one singer can reach everybody in the world, and make all the other singers feel inferior because they're not like him. Once that gets started he gets backed by so much cash and so much power that he becomes a monstrous invader from outer space, crushing the life out of all the other human possibilities. My life has been devoted to opposing that tendency.

Studying folklore and finding ways to preserve and present older forms in innovative ways is a joyous act, because it makes the presenters and their audiences part of the creative chain of transmission. In listening to the ballad and epic for three days, visitors to the Gathering are not simply audiences. Ballads and epics are performed—they are changed in the unspoken dialogue that takes place with audience, and the listeners are part of the chain. We no longer live in a world where songs and poems are passed down primarily through informal oral tradition. Yet they remain our common cultural heritage. We invite you to become part of the process whereby ballads and epics are preserved and reinvented for a new generation. Carry them on.

The People's Poetry Gathering offers a wide variety of special programs for high school students and teachers. A Teacher's Guide on oral poetry traditions (produced with Teachers & Writers Collaborative) is available, as is an issue of Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students. For a copy of the Teacher's Guide and for more detailed information on registering for school programs, call 1-800-333-5982 ext. 4 or visit the educational website of the Gathering at www.carts.org.