

THE LITERARY ANATOMY

Teaching the Ballad

New Songs to Old Airs

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*The ballad is the story of the song
and what goes on and on.* —Bob Holman

Immensely flexible and with a very long history, the ballad has been one of the backbones (and the source forms) for innovative, hybrid American art since the time of the first European settlers. Most of us are aware of the fascinating trajectory of the ancient British ballads that were brought over the sea and transformed into Appalachian ballads, in much the way fairy tales such as “Jack the Giant Killer” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” were changed into the Appalachian “Jack Tales.” But we are less apt to stop and consider how deeply embedded the metrical patterns of the ballad are in American poetry and in the American cultural reality—which includes rock-and-roll and related American inventions.

The ballad is, quite simply, the link between the written and the sung: it is the vehicle for children’s songs, hymns, lullabies, political anthems, folk songs, heavy metal “power ballads,” sweeping love ballads, movie soundtrack themes, and nearly every type of popular song. It has always been, of course, a shared tradition. As Lewis Turco has noted, the ballad form is “universal in the western world.” And now, ironically, with the global spread of American culture, the ballad is everywhere.

COUNTING IT OUT

Formally, there is what's called "ballad meter": quatrains that alternate between four-stress and three-stress lines, and contain an *abcb* (or *abab*) rhyme pattern. Turco calls the form "Accentual-Syllabic." This means that there are usually 8 syllables on the first line (two syllables per beat), 6 in the second, 8 syllables in the third, 6 in the fourth, and so on. Remember, though, the relationship of metrical beats or accents to syllables is *variable*: as in all song forms, you can slip in more syllables around the beat if you need to, especially on the downbeat(s). That's why you can sing the following two variations on the ballad rhyme-scheme to the same tune:

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
like a diamond in the sky

and

Stintilight Stintilight O Globular Vivific
Fain may I fathom thy Nature's Specific
Loftily poised on either capacious
Greatly resembles a gem carbonaceous

They both have the same number of beats, even though the second "translation into big words" has more syllables. So bear in mind that you can slip in extra syllables if you need to when you are writing your ballad.

The ballad meter is found in just about *all* of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson chose the rhythm because it is the "common meter" of hymns. You can actually sing her poems to "The Yellow Rose of Texas" or "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing in Perfect Harmony"—although those tunes seem too swingly to me to suit her mood. Hymn tunes that are in common meter work much better. Try, for example, crooning a Dickinson poem to the world's best known hymn, "Amazing Grace":

I reckon—when I count at all—
First—Poets—Then the Sun—
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—
And then—the List is done—

But, looking back—the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole—
The Others look a needless Show—
So I write—Poets—All—

Interestingly, I don't think Emily ever really "chose" ballad form to write most of her life's amazing work. In a way, it chose her; those meters were firmly engraved in her brain during the many hours of pew-sitting (only relieved by standing and hymn-singing) in which her mind drifted in and out of countless sermons proposing what, for her, were unsatisfactory, albeit stimulating, explanations of the nature of existence. So she wrote her own proposals into the ecstatic gaps, with innovative capitalizations and fitful windows of dashes to let in light and space:

I dwell in Possibility—
 A fairer House than Prose—
 More numerous for Windows—
 Superior—for Doors—

PRESERVING THE AIRS: SONG AS MNEMONIC DEVICE

Mnemosyne means "memory" and is the mother of the muses. The mnemonic device of song rhythms and metrics syncing up to (and in counterpoint with) heartbeat, breath, and other somatic groundswells is a force difficult for anyone to ignore—especially poets. The connection between poetry and music is ancient and ongoing. Even contemporary poets we don't usually think of as using "traditional" rhyme and meter have powerful traces of hymns and ballads in their work. (Robert Creeley, for example, mentioned hearing "The Old Rugged Cross" as a child, and I hear the musicality of song even more strongly in his work as a result.) The phrase "to the tune of" and the headnote "to the choirmaster" are found throughout Old Testament Psalms. Chinese poems have formal melodic structures that span a wide variety of poems about very different subjects. The word that poet Norma Cole uses for the title of her book *Contrafact* means "a 16th-century church tune spliced with secular lyrics." Likewise, song has always borrowed from poetry. Protestant hymns were made by taking folk songs and splicing in religious words. One example is "What Child Is This," a "same tune" relative of "Greensleeves." Francis Scott Key, incidentally, took the tune of a popular drinking song of the day (featuring Anacreon, the 5th-century semi-erotic poet) to make our national anthem. Try singing these words to the tune of the "Star-Spangled Banner":

To Anacreon in heaven
 Where he sat in full glee
 These sons of harmony
 Sent a petition
 that he
 their inspirer and patron would be
 when this answer arrived from the jolly old Grecian
 Fife fiddle and flute no longer be mute

I'll lend you my name
and inspire you to boot
and then I'll enjoin you
like me to entwine
the myrtle of Venus
and Bacchus' vine....

(And then, a century and a half later, Jimi Hendrix played it again.)

Something in music, in sung-poems, really wakes people up—the audience truly listens to a bare voice calling out. As Louis Zukofsky points out, this bridges the gap between the poles of speech and music:

Upper limit music
lower limit speech.

Zukofsky continues:

Returning to the influence of music upon verse: this influence affects not only the rhythms of the latter but also its style and content. Though words take time to say, as notes take time to play, words do not, as notes do, express themselves merely as sounds in temporal motion; they express their meanings as well. In music, that is, the movement is the expression; in poetry it is but a very small part of it.¹

Robert Burns wrote his poems as lyrics to the Scottish airs (traditional songs played on the bagpipe) and folk songs that he was afraid were being lost and forgotten. He reasoned that if people had words to sing with the tunes, they would be remembered. Burns collected all the material he could find for the creation of the Scots Musical Museum, of which he was both literary and musical curator. About his “new songs to old airs,” Burns wrote:

Sometimes merely by the substitution, here and there, of a new word, or phrase, or line, or the partial reconstruction of a stanza; often by a combined process of omission, condensation and addition...a merely halting and vulgar, if, in some respects, clever, doggerel ditty, becomes transformed into a noble and finished masterpiece.

Here is Burns on his compositional method:

Until I am a complete master of a tune in my own singing (such as it is), I never can compose for it. My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment corresponding to my idea of the musical expression; then choose my theme.

I view the ballad as the ultimate field (or form) for truth-telling through appropriation.

Again, even of the advantage of having only the old title, when the song has been lost, and composing the rest of the verses to suit that line...This has always a finer effect than composing English words, or words with an idea foreign to the spirit of the old title. When old titles of songs convey any idea at all, they will generally be found to be quite in the spirit of the air.²

As the hymns did to Dickinson and the Scots songs did to Burns, the gifts one receives in childhood affect one for life. W. K. McNeil once wrote:

Had I but words to say how these tunes are bound with the life of each singer, knit with his earliest sense impressions, and therefore dearer than any other music could ever be, impossible to forget as the sound of your mother's voice.³

This is true for me also. I remember so viscerally my mother's voice singing the words of Brahms's lullaby: "Long ago there was born in a city called David." In her autobiography, *My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, Dolly Parton describes the influence that her Aunt Martha's singing had on her as a child:

She would sit me on her knee and ride me up and down as she would sing: "Tip Toe, Tip Toe, Little Dolly Parton / She's got a red dress just like mine / She's got a red dress just like mine / She's got nine." I remember being amazed that Aunt Martha knew a song that had my name in it. It never occurred to me that you could just put it in there. And after all, I was special—why wouldn't there be a song about a special little girl? That was the first song I was ever aware of and it was like a drug to me. I used to clap my little hands and squeal, "Sing it again Aunt Martha, sing it again" and she usually would.... It didn't bother me at all that I didn't have a red dress, let alone nine. If Aunt Martha said it was true, I thought it must be so....⁴

Robert Burns's tunes live on in many strange and wonderful ways. In a wonderful book and CD collection of children's songs and "pass play songs" from the Caribbean, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, one of my favorites is "a group of children led by Anita Wilkins, aged fourteen, in Brick Kiln Village, Nevis," singing, "How green you are / How green you are / How green you are how green" to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" (Burns collected and edited the version that became the standard). The *Brown Girl in the Ring* version includes plays on the word *green* (with variants using *silly* or *stupid*) and patterns of clapping. (There are many, many variations on "Auld Lang Syne," by the way. Musicologist Alan Lomax notes that a parody of it is widely sung in U.S. summer camps: "We're Here Because We're Here Because We're Here Because We're Here," a great absurdist loop.)

In a Teachers & Writers workshop with third graders in Jackson Heights, Queens, I used the children's song "Skip to My Lou" as a model for them to write new versions of, new verses to. The students came from a wide variety of cultures. The success of the exercise, I think, was due to the catchy rhythm and the repetition. One verse I particularly remember was, "I can write faster, faster than you (3x) / Skip to the Lou my Darling," which they all sang together with abandon during our final reading.

But back to exactly what makes a ballad. Lewis Turco argues that the ballad is not a fixed form; it can be written in any meter. And what about content? It is often content's dream to dredge up the dark side, to dish out the "heavy stuff," whether it be an unspeakable sadness or anger or outrage, or a story that must not be forgotten. That's why photographer Nan Goldin called her visual diary *The Ballad of Sexual Dependence*: not due to any formal resemblance, but because of the ballad's nature to embody in narrative form the secrets we humans are capable of. There is a cathartic aspect to ballads, one which I think comes from living vicariously through some other person's intensity. A break-up doesn't feel as bad when we listen to a heartfelt, tormented ballad. For me, it's a relief to know someone has felt as bad as I do—and at the same time I feel glad I wasn't strangled in the night or shot or drowned like some of the women protagonists of love and murder ballads.

In his introduction to *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, Woody Guthrie speaks about the dark funkiness of the human soul that ballads can conjure up. He tells of people he met after he put up a sign up that said "Magnetic Healing, Fortune Telling, and Cancer Curing":

But you'd be surprised how many hundreds of folks come down.... They come and set. They listened and thought. They wept and cried and went into every model of nervous breakdown, including the very latest. They told you everything about their self, and went into their family history two or three generations back. You waded through all kinds of stuff they was afraid of, all kinds of things that had done happened in the past, and ought to have been forgot about forty years ago, as well as junk that hadn't happened yet, and cried about things that were going to jump on them 23 years in the future. I learned how to swim through all of this driftwood, and I haven't forgot so far.⁵

These collective human experiences, these stories, are what make ballads.

I view the ballad as the ultimate field (or form) for truth-telling through appropriation. We can take cues from the folk ballads as stitchers of tissues of quotes from the larger culture. There is an extensive process at work behind the creation of a folk ballad, which I liken to the organic way in which new words are added to the dictionary. But I believe in our power as wordsmiths, as poet folk, to *create new words* that will "take," *new songs* that will be sung and used and memorized and given up to be changed, the first whispers (or growls) in a cosmic game of "Telephone."

The poet Sterling A. Brown viewed the literary ballad in much the same terms as he did the blues poem: as an analogue to its folk song counterpart. Brown wrote many amazing ballads, including “The Ballad of Joe Meek” and his “Slim Greer” series. Robert Hayden’s “Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield” and “A Ballad of Remembrance” are remarkable examples of literary ballads that are true to the form’s populist roots, telling stories of real people whose trials and tribulations assume folk-hero status.

Brown, Hayden, and many others used the ballad to break down boundaries of what could and could not be written. This puts me in the mind of one of Bernadette Mayer’s celebrated writing experiments: “Write what cannot be written; for example, compose an index.”⁶ When I was studying with Robert Coover, he once suggested that we look at an index of folk motifs, and that we collage motifs into our own stories. Why not try to write ballads for all the stories that need to be told? Why not filter experience from all sources into the sung stanza, straight away?

HOW BALLADS TELL STORIES

We can learn and crib from the ways the folk ballads tell stories. Their method is almost cinematic in its use of ellipsis. In Tim McNeeley’s ballad “Mercy,” we find an example of this: a musical segue with the graphic, pivotal death scene left out, off-camera.

I don't want to be here but I am
 Because you asked me to
 And I can't take the pain of life
 But I will
 Because you asked me to
 And I'd be gone if it wasn't for you

[*music*]

And when they put her in the ground
 It read “Mercy”
 And Mercy was her name
 And all the while she laid still.

This technique of ellipsis lends the scene a sense of irreversibility, of fatefulness. Another example is a version of the ballad “There was a Lady Living in York” that I heard at the Mt. Airy Fiddlers’ Convention Ballad Competition. In this version—“There Was a Lady Living Yore” (akin to a combination of *yonder* and *o’er*, as in “days of yore”)—the death of the babes is condensed into two lyrical lines, whereas in

some versions it is the very graphic: "She took out her wee pen knife / and there she twined those two babes' lives." (Another intriguing linguistic transformation can be noted here: "wee pen" was possibly originally "weapon knife" in Scottish versions and later elided to "little pen knife" in Southern versions.)

MORE MODERN BALLADEERS

Glorious new ballads are created every day to older, morphing tunes; they are being burned onto CDs in basements even as we speak. Versioning is an age-old tradition: is it a postmodern collage or a homemade quilt? Tuli Kupferberg, of the proto-punk do-it-yourself poetry garage band The Fugs and his spin-off project The Fuxxons ("as in Exxon"), is a major master/trickster/satirist/practitioner of this art. Kupferberg has made hundreds of what he calls "parasongs," which use familiar tunes so everyone can sing along ("para" as in *parody* and *parachute*). Here is an excerpt from a parasong of unknown origin that's been circulating on the Internet this year, sung to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It":

If we cannot find Osama, bomb Iraq.
If the markets hurt your mama, bomb Iraq.
If the terrorists are Saudi,
And the bank takes back your Audi,
And the TV shows are bawdy,

Bomb Iraq.

If corporate fraud is growin', bomb Iraq.
If your ties to it are showin', bomb Iraq.
If your politics are sleazy,
And hiding that ain't easy,
And your manhood's looking teeny,

Bomb Iraq.

Even if we have no allies, bomb Iraq.
From the sand dunes to the valleys, bomb Iraq.
So to hell with the inspections,
Let's look tough for the elections,
Close your mind and take directions,

Bomb Iraq.

I believe in our power as wordsmiths...to create new songs...the first whispers (or growls) in a cosmic game of "Telephone."

Kupferberg's other parasong treasures include "What a Friend We Have in Sigmund," to the tune of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (a parodic critique of Freud that rivals Lacan's), and "The Age of Uranus," to the tune of "The Age of Aquarius."⁷ One of his more gorgeous splicings is a version of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," arranged and sung to an ancient Jewish devotional melody. (Kupferberg is currently looking for more parasongs. If you write one, he is listed in the New York *Yellow Pages*).

Stephan Smith is another noted practitioner of the contemporary ballad.⁸ He also rewrites traditional songs for pertinent situations (e.g., "The Ballad of Abner Louima"). Here is an excerpt from his ballad, "The Bell":

"Oh, where are you going?" said the man at his desk
 "I'm going to a new world," said the child and he stood
 And he stood, and he stood, and t'were well that he stood
 "I'm going to a new world," said the child and he stood

"Oh, I'm sounding drums of war," said the man at his desk
 "Oh, I will not fight your war," said the child and he stood
 And he stood, and he stood, and t'were well that he stood
 "I will not fight your war," said the child and he stood

"Oh, but don't you love your country?" said the man at his desk
 "Yes, I do, but you don't," said the child and he stood
 And he stood, and he stood, and t'were well that he stood
 "I do, but you don't," said the child and he stood

"Oh, but do you know the truth?" said the man at his desk
 "Yes, you lie and call it truth," said the child and he stood
 And he stood, and he stood, and t'were well that he stood
 You lie and call it truth," said the child and he stood....

Another outstanding modern balladeer is Helen Adam. Her strange, haunting, half-chanted, half-sung urban ballads take cues from traditional Scottish Border ballads and tales. "Black is the Color of My True Love's Skin" is a line in an Adam poem that references the traditional "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair." Adam first published a book of ballads as a young girl in Scotland. Later she met Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer in the San Francisco Renaissance scene.⁹ One of her updated ballads was even included in Donald Allen's seminal avant-garde anthology *The New American Poetry*—a ballad with the two lines of 4 beats and 3 beats combined into one long line. Here is the first of many stanzas:

I Love My Love

In the dark of the moon the hair rules.—Robert Duncan

There was a man who married a maid. She laughed as he led her home.
The living fleece of her long bright hair she combed with a golden comb.
He led her through his barley fields where the saffron poppies grew.
She combed and whispered, "I love my love." Her voice like a plaintive coo.
Ha! Ha!
Her voice like a plaintive coo.

BALLAD EXPERIMENTS

1. Write a parasong: Brainstorm a list of favorite songs from childhood and from now. Pick one and transcribe it. Then perform one of the following operations on it. (After each step, stop and sing the new words.)

A. Cross out words in the song until you have a much more minimal poem.

B. Write new words to it—think of ironic implications, and/or beautiful variations.

C. Use the N + 7 substitution method: Take every noun in the piece and replace it with the seventh noun down in the dictionary.

Example: "The Answer My Friend is Blowing in the Wind"
becomes "The Antecedent My Frock is blowing in the Window"

D. Semi-definitional song/poem: Replace the nouns in the song with the entire dictionary definition of those nouns.

E. Translation by negation: Here's an example from Tuli Kupferberg:

"Let the sunshine in"
becomes "Let the moonshine out"

2. Make a list of misheard song lyrics and choose the best one for the title.

Example: "Love & Devotion" as "Love Anti-Potion"

Playful mishearings or homophonic (mis)translations can also be adapted into the body of a ballad. For instance, I transformed "She rubbed her knife against her shoe / The more she rubbed the redder it grew" (from "There Was a Lady Living Yore") into "She had a love she thought was true / The more he rubbed the redder she grew."

3. With a group of students, have everyone design and print up ballads on broadsides. Pass them out in the hallways, or find other creative ways to distribute them. One student of mine printed sheets of poems, cut them out in the shapes of fall leaves, and taped them to the sidewalks.
4. Experiment with appropriation and collage. Note down words and phrases from signs, overheard conversation, or the tabloids, and put them in a ballad form. Then sing it!
5. Write new verses to the hymn "Amazing Grace." Mad Lib every word.
6. Cultivate oral culture: Ask your parents what songs and games they remember playing and singing together as children, especially hand-clap or jump-rope rhymes. Memorize them and write new verses and versions.

OTHER USEFUL BALLAD-RELATED FORMS

Cumulative: A song in which each verse adds a new element that is repeated in each subsequent verse thereafter. An example is "The Twelve Days of Christmas": On the first day, the singer receives a mere "partridge in a pear tree," but on the second he or she acquires "two turtle doves and a partridge," and so on, for each day, verse and set of improbable objects.

Floating Verses: Lyrics that “float” from song to song. For example, the words: “Who will shoe your pretty little foot / And who will glove your hand” show up in the ballad collected by F. J. Child, “The Lass of Roch Royal,” but also in the minimally related Carter Family song, “The Storms Are on the Ocean,” among others.

1. Louis Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).
2. *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907–21)*. Volume XI, Chapter X.
3. W. K. McNeil, ed., *Southern Folk Ballads* (Little Rock, Ark: August House, 1987).
4. Dolly Parton, *My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (New York: Harper, 1994).
5. *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, compiled by Alan Lomax, annotation by Woody Guthrie, transcription by Pete Seeger. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967, 1999).
6. Bernadette Mayer’s list of experiments is accessible online at www.poetryproject.com/features/mayer.html
7. Tuli Kupferberg, *Listen to the Mockingbird* (Soquel, Calif.: Morningbird Press, 1973).
8. Stephan Smith’s ballads are accessible online at www.StephanSmith.com.
9. Helen Adam’s work will be celebrated as a part of the People’s Poetry Gathering on April 11, 2003.