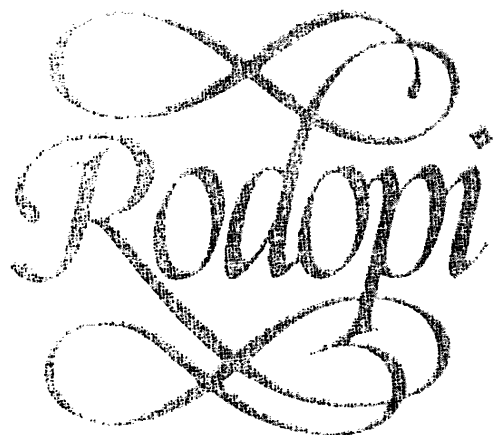


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Lyric - Keeper of the Past.

On the Poetics of Popular Poetry in T. Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* and J.G. Herder's *Volkslieder*

The highly influential concept of a "natural" literature which would oppose the artificial rhetoric of learned poetry came to the fore in the second half of the eighteenth century. In English and German literature, its emergence was fostered especially—besides James Macpherson's putative Ossianic poetry published between 1760 and 1765—by the publication of two anthologies of poetry, namely Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765) and Johann Gottfried Herder's *Volkslieder* (1778/79). What exactly Percy and Herder were aiming at when they presented their collections to the public is, however, far from obvious. The full title of Percy's anthology, for instance, reads *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and other Pieces of our earlier Poets, (Chiefly of the Lyric kind.) Together with some few of later Date.*¹ As its title indicates, Percy's collection—nowadays acknowledged as "the single most important work of the medieval revival" (Sabor 475) in English literature and of crucial influence upon Romantic poetry—cuts across several lines of literary nomenclature. It gathers

¹

I quote Schröder's edition of the *Reliques* instead of Henry B. Wheatley's (widely used but inferior) one which follows Percy's fourth edition. Schröder prints Percy's first edition (1765) and includes the three later editions (1767, 1775, 1794) as variants.

medieval as well as contemporary texts; it includes narrative and non-narrative texts, “artificial” forms like sonnets and popular genres like ballads and songs; some of them stem from oral tradition but others are written by well known individual authors such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe. Herder’s *Volkslieder* seem even more mixed. Whereas Percy collected only English texts, we find in Herder’s anthology 38 German texts (of 162 texts altogether) along with translations from 19 other languages including Greek, Latin, Nordic, Estonic, Litvianian, and Peruvian (i.e. Quetchua). The origins of the texts cover a period of 2000 years from antiquity to the present. Despite this wide range both Herder and Percy meant their collections to be homogeneous in the sense that they represent examples of popular poetry or “Naturpoesie” (to use Herder’s term). It seems that Percy and Herder, at least in the history of their own literatures, were among the first to conceive of popular poetry as one single comprehensive literary genre. Its specific character, however, still stands in need of clarification.

It is usually held that the spell of popular poetry relies on the assumed authenticity of its primitive origin which implies features such as collective authorship and reception, oral tradition, variable text, simple language and formulaic style. My aim is to show that this view does not really match the concepts to be found in Percy or in Herder. Instead of defining popular poetry merely through a list of specific features, they developed a holistic concept which encompasses aspects of authorship, reception, text, theme and style but must basically be described in pragmatic terms. Popular poetry in the sense introduced by Percy and Herder should be recognized primarily as a kind of communication which corresponds to an idealized archaic culture. Recent folklore studies—largely ignored by literary critics—describe such a communication to be characteristic of “small groups”. Although the two anthologies aim towards a similar concept of popular poetry, they are characterized by different attitudes. Percy’s goal is to reconstruct, in a philological manner, popular poetry as a *document* of the past, whereas Herder intends to *simulate* the corresponding archaic communication. In both cases, however, the editor plays a crucial role in the hermeneutic interaction between text and reader.

Let me illustrate and render more precise what popular poetry means by the analysis of an example. The plot of “King Estmere” (*Reliques* I.6 and *Volkslieder* I.2.22) is told in 69 ballad stanzas and runs

roughly like this: Estmere, bachelor king of England, is advised by his brother to court king Adland’s daughter who is widely known for her beauty. The two brothers ride abroad to Adland’s castle. There Adland informs them that the day before the heathen king of Spain had courted his daughter, that she had rejected him, and that she most certainly will also reject Estmere. When the daughter appears, however, she immediately consents to marry Estmere. Estmere and his brother set out for their home country to prepare for the wedding. But just after their departure the king of Spain arrives with numerous warriors at Adland’s castle and insists on marrying Adland’s daughter. Informed by a messenger, the brothers return to the castle. On their way they pick a magic herb from the ground which changes the white colour of their skin into brown, thus disguising their identities. Moreover, the herb produces a writing on their foreheads which says that they are “the boldest men,/ That are in all Christentyè” (v. 165-6). At the castle, they defeat the Spaniards through the power given to them by the magic herb. In the end, Estmere marries his lady and takes her home.

Percy found the ballad of “King Estmere” in the famous old “Folio Manuscript” (ca. 1650) which was the most important source for the texts to be published in the *Reliques*. The Folio Manuscript’s version of the ballad is lost so we cannot check for Percy’s emendations.² We may assume, though, that he made corrections concerning orthography, metre, rhyme, syntax, and lexicon because he did so throughout the *Reliques* in order to make the “barbarous productions of unpolished ages” (*Reliques* 1) more acceptable to the public. His presumable emendations notwithstanding, Percy introduces the ballad with the remark: “This old Romantic Legend [...] bears marks of great antiquity” (59). In order to overcome the strangeness produced by the text’s “antiquity”, Percy provides the reader with a huge amount of historical information conveyed in introduction, commentaries, footnotes and glossaries. I quote from his extensive commentary to the ballad:

That a youthful monarch should take a journey into another kingdom to visit his mistress incog. was a piece of gallantry paralleled in our own Charles I. but that king Adland should be found lolling or leaning at his gate (v. 35.) may be thought perchance a little out of character. And yet the

² Cf. Wheatley’s edition 86 and Willinsky 43-4 about alterations of the ballad’s text in the different editions of the *Reliques*. The latest study on Percy’s editing principles is by Knapman.

great painter of manners, Homer, did not think it inconsistent with decorum to represent a king of the Taphians rearing himself at the gate of Ulysses to inquire for that monarch, when he touched at Ithaca as he was taking a voyage with a ship's cargo of iron to dispose in traffic (Odys. α. 105). So little ought we to judge of ancient manners by our own (60).

In a similar way Percy explains the surprising fact that Estmere should ride on his horse directly into the main hall of Adland's castle while Adland and the Spanish king sit at table (v. 195-6). This, Percy says, is not to be condemned because such a behaviour "was usual in the ages of chivalry; and even to this day we see a relic of this custom still kept up, in the champion's riding into Westminster Hall during the coronation dinner" (61).

The way in which Percy comments this ballad is instructive for the *Reliques* in general. By giving the reader pieces of historical information, Percy tries to adjust the text to the demands of traditional poetics. Thus the reader can understand the text's strangeness in accordance with the classicist norm of verisimilitude. Percy does not—as Herder—seek for a different poetics specific to popular poetry which would legitimize its deviances from the standards of learned poetry. For Percy, the reader's impression of strangeness is not due to the presence of a different poetics in the text but to the lack of historical knowledge in the reader. Textual features which neither obey classicist norms nor can be explained by historical documents, however, simply exhibit the imperfect state of poetry in ancient times. Texts dominated by such features should be regarded "not as labours of art, but as effusions of nature, showing the first efforts of ancient genius" (*Reliques* 2). Thus Percy adopts a progressive model of cultural and literary evolution according to which history shows "the progress of life and manners"; in its course "barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed" (*Reliques* 2).

As an example of popular poetry the ballad of "King Estmere" is interesting not only because of its "antiquity" but also for thematic reasons. Estmere and his brother succeed in courting the bride only after disguising themselves as harpers and singers. Percy comments:

the reader will see in this ballad, the character of the old minstrels, (those successors of the bards) raised much

higher than he has yet observed it. [...] Here he will see him mixing in the company of kings without ceremony: no mean proof of the great antiquity of this poem. The farther we carry our inquiries back, the greater respect we find paid to the professors of poetry and music among all the Celtic and Gothic nations. Their character was deemed so sacred, that under its sanction our famous king Alfred made no scruple to enter the Danish camp, and found no difficulty to gain admittance to the king's headquarters (60-1).

Percy was probably the first English scholar to pay attention to the social role of the poet in medieval times. In the very year of the publication of the *Reliques* he published the "Essay on the Ancient English Minstrels" (1765) which was included in the *Reliques* from the second edition (1767) onwards. Far from having "really very little to do with the contents of the *Reliques*" (Wheatley in his edition of the *Reliques*, xvi), the figure of the minstrel—Percy's encompassing term for the medieval poet—is important for the concept of popular poetry. It suggests a certain cultural background, close to Herder's view of "Naturpoesie", in which Percy situates popular poetry. The minstrel is a poet who participates as a man of action in the adventures he depicts in his songs. Moreover, he performs in face-to-face-communication with a public that shares with him the values of an archaic community.

In his translation of the ballad, Herder follows Percy's English text quite closely. He preserves metre, stanzas, rhyme and most of the stylistic features. On the other hand, he skips completely the erudite philological framework which Percy provides. Herder does not help his readers to understand the difficulties of the text by adding historic, grammatical, lexicographic etc. explanations. To the contrary in his translation he introduces minor new details which are dysfunctional according to classicist standards of narrative coherence. To give but two examples: Adland sends a page with an urgent message to Estmere: "One whyle then the page he went,/ Another whyle he ranne" (v. 115-6). Herder translates: "Ein' Weil' der Edelknabe kam,/ Ein' ander Weil' er lief" (v. 115-6). In order to preserve the semantic content, Herder should have translated "went" by "ging" instead of "kam". His choice does not match the demands of a literal translation. It seems to be motivated by the possibility of using assonance and (incomplete) alliteration ("knabe kam") rather than by semantic accuracy. Second example: Estmere and his brother return to Adland's castle. The colour of their skin has been changed by the

power of the magic herb into black and brown. At the gate the porter speaks to them:

Sayd, And [if] your color were white and redd,
As it is blacke and browne,
Ild saye king Estmere and his brother
Were comen untill this towne (v. 183-186).

Herder translates:

Sprach: "Und Eur Farb ist weiß und roth,
Und Eur' ist schwarz und braun;
König Esthmer und sein Bruder ist hier,
Will ich ansagen, traun!" (v. 183-186)

Herder thus changes Percy's conditional clause into a parallelism ("und—und") which is contradictory in itself (opposite skin colours being equated). Again, this seems to be motivated not by the logic of the argument but rather by the appeal of anaphoric repetition. Herder regarded parallelism and anaphora to be characteristic devices of popular poetry and used them, for instance, extensively in his translation of the biblical *Song of Songs* published in the same year as the *Volkslieder* (1778). Some of the deviations from the English original may, of course, simply be faults of translation caused by Herder's notoriously hasty working habits. They fit, however, into a general tendency observable in the *Volkslieder*, namely to neglect semantic content, narrative coherence and mimetic plausibility in order to gain stylistic effects. The disposition of the poems in the anthology, finally, also contributes to blur their specific historical meaning. Herder's principles of order in the *Volkslieder* are not obvious and have always been a matter of discussion;³ at any rate, the poems are not grouped according to language, chronology, or nationality. This suggests that Herder did not want the reader to understand the poems with reference to the different cultural backgrounds in which they originated. To sum up: Herder's renunciation of philological explanation; the tendency of his translation to obscure rather than to clarify the semantic meaning; the grouping of the poems in a way that effaces their specific historical background—these features enforce each other and seem to bring about the effect of making the

³ Cf. Gaier's survey in his edition (918-925).

understanding of the poems more difficult for the reader.

Such findings correspond to Herder's poetological statements about the nature of "Naturpoesie" outlined in particular in the introductory essay to the second volume of the *Volkslieder* and in his famous essay *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker* (1771/73). Let me try to summarize Herder's rather vague and terminologically inconsistent statements about what he calls "Naturpoesie" but also, synonymously, "Volkspoesie", "Volksgesang", "Volkslied", "Lied", "Gesang", "Ode", "Lyrik" and even "Dichtung".⁴ As mentioned above, Herder and Percy include samples of a number of different literary genres such as ballads, folk songs, legends, sonnets, and dramatic monologues under the encompassing label of "Ancient Poetry" resp. "Volkslied". Even one and the same text can be subject to different designations. "King Estmere", for example, is called "legend" and "ballad" by Percy, "Mährchen" by Herder. All the poems, though, are bound together by a quality which Herder sometimes calls "lyrisch". I understand "lyrisch" to designate that quality which Herder regards as the essence of popular poetry and hence as the defining property of this kind of literature. It is important to pay attention to the methodological significance of lyric in this new sense. In the "Noten und Abhandlungen" of his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduced his influential concept of "das Lyrische" as one of the three "Naturformen der Dichtung" (together with "das Epische" und "das Dramatische"). Herder's notion of lyric is materially different from Goethe's but methodologically similar: Half a century before Goethe, Herder denotes with his term "lyrisch" not a historic literary genre like ode, ballad or legend but a certain quality which cuts across many (if not all) such genres. Taken in this sense, the term does not serve for a definite classification of genres. Lyric quality inheres to a greater or lesser degree in singular texts, independent of their generic identity. (Some genres like ballads and songs may support this quality better than others, though.) Popular poetry thus is not to be identified with certain genres.

It remains to explain, however, why Herder and Percy tend to assimilate popular poetry and lyric. They must have been aware of the fact that popular literature exists not only in verse but also in prose (e.g. fairy tales). An answer may consist in the proximity, in eighteenth century

⁴ Kircher summarizes the use of these interrelated terms at Herder's time.

poetics, of the lyric genre to sentiments and, at least in Herder's case, to the origin of language. In his *Principes de la littérature* (1764), Charles Batteux conceived of "Poésie lyrique" as the presentation and imitation of sentiments: "On pourra donc définir la Poésie lyrique, celle qui exprime le sentiment" (216-7). Herder also postulates the affinity between lyric and sentiments but gives it a new meaning. He regards lyric not as imitation but as expression of sentiments. As for the audience, lyric is to be felt rather than to be grasped in a cognitive manner. Lyric communicates an essential part of its meaning by way of non-semantic (and hence non-cognitive) features of language like rhythm, metre, rhyme and melody. This transformation from Batteux' mimetic to an expressive poetics is crucial for the understanding of popular poetry in Herder. Unlike the later romantic view of lyric poetry as expression of the poet's individual subjectivity, however, popular poetry expresses only sentiments which correspond to standard situations of human life and can thus be understood anywhere and anytime: "so bleibt am Boden des Gefäßes die Wahrheit übrig, die sich auch in andern Völkern und Zeitaltern gleichartig dargetan hat" (*Volkslieder* 230-1). The collective validity of popular poetry is guaranteed by every unalienated reader's capacity to grasp the meaning of the poem intuitively instead of rationalizing it. The second aspect of the proximity between popular poetry and lyric, closely connected to the first, is Herder's view of the origin of language as formulated, for instance, in the essay *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772). According to him, language in its original condition is nothing but expression of sentiments ("Sprache der Empfindung" as opposed to "der feinen, spät erfundenen metaphysischen Sprache" of modern culture, *Abhandlung* 698, 701)—what is also the essence of poetry. When "popular" in Herder's sense, lyric keeps this origin and communicates it to the audience.

According to Herder, lyric (taken to be the essence of popular poetry) at the textual level exhibits certain stylistic features. Let me just indicate two of them. (a) Herder emphasizes "daß Nichts in der Welt mehr Sprünge und kühne Würfe hat, als Lieder des Volkes" (*Auszug* 255): Popular poetry is characterized by a negligence of grammatical and mimetic coherence. (b) "Das Wesen des Liedes ist *Gesang*, nicht *Gemälde*: seine Vollkommenheit liegt im *melodischen Gange* der Leidenschaft oder Empfindung" (*Volkslieder* 247): Instead of aiming at grammatical or mimetic coherence, popular poetry favours phonetic and melodic values of language. For the translator of popular poetry semantic aspects are thus of secondary importance—"nicht der Inhalt, sondern ihr Ton, ihre Weise

war Zweck derselben" (*Volkslieder* 248).

It seems to me, though, that Herder conceives of these stylistic features only as secondary effects of a more basic phenomenon which is situated in the pragmatic dimension. The essence of popular poetry is not to be identified with stylistic features but with a certain use of texts. This use is specific to a communication which is at once collective, archaic, and face-to-face. Popular poetry deals with universal themes like birth, love, marriage, labour, war and death within the schematic horizon of a homogeneous community: "Gesang liebt Menge, die Zusammenstimmung vieler: er fodert das Ohr des Hörers und Chorus der Stimmen und Gemüter" (*Volkslieder* 230). The subjects of such a poetry are anthropological stock situations taken from the repertoire of a community's traditional culture. Thus every listener not yet alienated by modern culture is able to understand popular poetry without further aid. This is why Herder skips the historical framework so extensively provided by Percy and blurs the specific historical background of the poems.

Why, however, does Herder emphasize the fragmentary style of popular poetry? Why does he, in his translations, even enhance obscurities of the text? The answer lies in his conception of popular poetry as a specific form of communication. According to Herder, the poet-singer must participate in the real life situation he is singing about. Homer, for instance, greatest of all popular poets, "sang was er gehöret, stellte dar was er gesehen und lebendig erfaßt hatte" (*Volkslieder* 230-1). The audience, on the other hand, must be emotionally involved in order to understand the poem appropriately. The authentic communication of popular poetry takes place in situations where poet and audience both belong to the same community. Their interaction is conceived of as an consensual face-to-face-communication. The fragmentary nature of popular poetry is thus contextually completed through the encompassing communicative situation of which the text is only a part. Again, Herder interrelates the fragmentary style of popular poetry and the origin of language. In its first condition, language is nothing but a conglomerate of images and sentiments without grammar ("ein bloßer Zusammenfluß von Bildern und Empfindungen ohne Zusammenhang und Bestimmung", *Abhandlung* 764). Such a language appears incomplete and incomprehensible, however, only to someone who does not participate in the authentic communication of which that language is only a part: "den Zusammenhang zu allem muß die Welt geben, in die es gehört" (765).

Herder's view of popular poetry is remarkably similar to the notion of folklore discussed nowadays by some ethnologists. In folklore, "the narrator, his story, and his audience are all related to each other as components of a single continuum, which is the communicative act" (Ben-Amos 10). To be effective, the folkloric act must take place within "small groups" where the performer and the audience are in the same situation and are, moreover, part of the same reference group sharing similar values, beliefs, and background knowledge. Percy's archaic "minstrel" fits into this description as well as Herder's poetry of the "Volk".

To define popular poetry as a communicative event, however, does not render literary analysis unnecessary. How can popular poetry as propagated by Percy and Herder be grasped by literary criticism today? Percy's and Herder's own approaches cannot, to be sure, serve us as models anymore. I have dealt with this question elsewhere (cf. my "Formaler Mythos") and would like here to illustrate my approach with some remarks on "King Estmere". Regarding matters of narrative coherence, the ballad's "great antiquity" (*Reliques* 59) manifests itself mainly in a motivation of the events which seems to be insufficient, implausible, or even contradictory. "King Estmere's" ballad contains many of the like. To name just two examples: (a) When Estmere arrives at Adland's castle he is told that the daughter hasn't been in the main hall for seven years (v. 57-8); a few lines later, though, we read that the day before the Spanish king courted the daughter—an event most likely to happen in the hall. Another example: (b) The daughter's sudden consent to marry Estmere after having refused to marry anyone is told without any attempt to explain her change of mind (v. 75-78). Instead of regarding such elements as faults, however, we should try to find another frame of explanation. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotopos of adventure time" (*Forms* 87-110) can serve us here as a starting point: The time of the world which the ballad depicts is one in which just-in-time-arrivals, last-minute-rescues and, generally, the most unbelievable coincidences are quite usual. Moreover, the space where the events take place bears no topographic or cultural specificity at all; it merely enables the protagonists to be present or absent following only the demands of narrative functionality. Such features are typical of narratives dominated by formulaic plots in which a verosimilar motivation of events is of lesser importance (and hence is often neglected) than the fulfillment of the narrative structure. General features of such formulaic narratives have been described by structuralist narratologists and ethnologists in the wake

of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). In the particular case of "King Estmere" we can recognize one of the most important plot-types in medieval literature, namely the dangerous courting of a bride ("gefährliche Brautwerbung").⁵ This plot typically contains a specific stock of character-functions: a king who courts a bride who is another king's daughter, both later spouses gifted with gender-specific qualities (excellent strength resp. beauty), a helper and advisor (here: king Estmere's brother), opponents (the bride's father) and competitors (the king of Spain). Moreover, it includes the dangers of courting in a foreign kingdom, the final fulfillment of the task only after a second stay at the foreign castle, and masked identities—three motifs which are also present in our ballad. Finally, the plot includes fairy-tale elements like symbolic numbers (the bride laughs three times and hasn't entered the main hall for seven years) and magic devices (the magic herb which transforms the brothers' skin colour, produces a writing on their foreheads and makes them invincible).

Thus we can explain elements which could be regarded, according to classicist standards of verisimilitude, as deficiently motivated by applying another type of narrative coherence. This type is based on the formulaic character of the ballad and accords to mythical rather than to classicist norms. The two examples of seemingly deficient motivation mentioned above can thus be accounted for: (a) The seven years during which the king's daughter did not enter the castle's main hall signify a mythic period of separation—a "rite de passage" (Arnold van Gennep's term) which presupposes distance from the social sphere of her community (cf. Turner 24). This "preliminal" period ends with the arrival of her later husband Estmere. It possesses a time value different from the profane time of the everyday world (what is indicated by the choice of the magic number of seven) and hence is not to be taken as a time-extension in the ordinary sense. (b) Adland's daughter's sudden consent to marry Estmere does not stand in need of any psychological motivation because it corresponds to her narrative function as an actant to fulfill the narrative formula of the successful courting of the bride. According to this mythology she consents because she will marry the hero of the tale (the logic of verisimilitude would assume instead that she will marry the hero because she consents to).

⁵ Cf. Gaier's commentary (*Volkslieder* 1026) and, generally, Schmid-Cadalbert, esp. 87-8.

Both Percy and Herder establish popular poetry within the horizon of modern literature, accentuating its strangeness compared to learned poetry or "Kunstdichtung". But there is a decisive difference between Percy's and Herder's handling of this strangeness. Percy tries to bridge the gap by way of historico-philological explanation and reconstruction. In the *Reliques*, he not only chooses, corrects and groups his poems. He also adds four historical essays to his edition (including the one on the minstrels mentioned above) and provides numerous introductory remarks, footnotes, bibliographical references, and glossaries of archaic words and idioms. Contrary to Percy, Herder preserves and even enforces the strangeness of the texts. On the other hand, he also wants his reader to bridge the gap. For him, this cannot happen by way of philological reconstruction but through the modern reader's empathic grasping of the supposed archaic face-to-face-communication between poet-singer and audience. In order to reach this goal, the reader must try to supplement the fragmentary text through the intuition of the authentic situation in which the text originally was communicated. Such a supplement seems possible because popular poetry deals with stock situations common to all people. The archetypal plot of "King Estmere", for instance, can be effective in spite of its fragmented and obscured textual presentation because both singer and audience know the stock of plots which belongs to their common culture. In order to reach this goal, by the way, Herder simulates in the *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel* and in the introduction to the *Volkslieder* the same attitude which he wants to convey to his readers. Both essays display the rhetoric of an emphatic, fragmentary and consensual dialogue between friends (cf. Lugowski 277).

So in a time when the modern notion of literature with its components of individual authorship, stability of the (printed) text, fictional discourse, autonomous literary meaning and distanced (written) communication between author and reader had been solidly established, Herder postulated a different concept of poetry. In popular poetry, authors are not important, texts exist only in variants, plots depict real events, poetical meaning is a function of practical purposes, communication is face-to-face, and singer and audience are equally members of the same "small group".

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