The Oral Tradition in Scottish Gaelic Poetry

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During the last few decades, the term Oral Poetry has gained considerable currency among literary historians. Research on the poetry and song of preliterate communities in various parts of the world has produced its own crop of theories and dogmas to add to an older body of scholarship based on the study of the Ballad and the Folksong.

For this reason alone, it might be of interest to examine at some length a poetic tradition—such as we have in Gaelic—in the shaping of which oral composition and transmission have at all stages played an important part.

But clearly in the time at my disposal, and in a paper which is meant to be no more than a general review, I cannot afford to subject even the most egregious current dogma to a detailed examination. Still, I hope it will emerge from what I have to say that the Gaelic oral tradition has its own distinctive features; and that, by implication, propositions which may be valid in respect of one tradition are not necessarily so for oral poetry in general.

I propose to use the term Oral Poetry here as no more than a convenient label to describe both composition by unlettered poets and transmission by unlettered singers—even if some of what is so transmitted may actually have its genesis in writing. The fact of the matter is that in any society in which the art of writing is securely established, the purely oral is a very clusive creature indeed.

Naturally this makes it extremely difficult to define the area of discussion. In some sectors of it, the apparent opposition of 'oral' and 'written' may indeed be quite meaningless: a literate poet may, deliberately or not, produce poetry which is undistinguishable from the compositions of his unlettered brethren. What we can say, however, is that in Scottish Gaelic a body of poems exist which, as a matter of historical fact, have taken the form in which we know them in an environment in which oral poetry (as I have defined it) is at least the norm—and it is with this *shaping* of the tradition that I shall mostly concern myself.

But it may help to point the entanglement of 'oral' and 'written' if I cite the poetry of Duncan Ban Macintyre, who lived from 1724 to 1812. Macintyre, who was illiterate, dictated his poems to the Rev. Donald MacNicol, an Argyllshire minister who was himself a noted collector of poetry. This formed the basis of printed editions of the poet's work, of which Duncan Ban saw three in his own lifetime.

But meantime these same poems, or at least some of them, were circulating as songs in the Highlands and Islands, perhaps already developing variants. It is possible that

there were other songs—there were certainly some impromptu compositions—also in circulation, which never found their way into the editions, either because the bard did not dictate them, or because his editors rejected them.

We are still able to record certain of Duncan Ban's songs, but when we come to examine the texts of these we find that while some are considerably developed variants, others follow the book with extraordinary fidelity. What has happened there, of course, is that the printed text has stabilised the oral version.

Yet we would be completely unjustified in grounding a general proposition on that, for it also possible to cite songs of which there are twentieth-century oral versions and eighteenth-century MS versions that are almost identical. Even at this level of analysis, then, we can trace more than one current in the stream of oral verse. Nor is it only the actual poetry which is influenced by the written tradition. Duncan Ban is frequently cited as the most popular Gaelic poet—cited, that is to say, by contemporary singers. Yet the number of the songs that have had the quality to survive, out of the total that were once known, is comparatively small. It would seem as if the unlettered singers are to some extent expressing a value judgment formed outside the tradition and communicated to them with the authority of the written word behind it. Much the same could be said of other 'names' that people quote. I think it is true to say that unless we exercise caution we may be in danger both of seeing Gaelic oral poetry as more homogeneous than it in fact is, and of seeing it in terms of the predilections of eighteenth-century collectors, most of whom belonged to the upper stratum of Gaelic society, and all of whom collected selectively.

With the eighteenth century, our materials for the study of Gaelic oral poetry really emerge. Setting aside two very interesting but rather special collections—the Book of the Dean of Lismore (from the early part of the sixteenth century) and Duncan MacRae's Dorlach Laoidhean—known as the Fernaig MS (from the end of the seventeenth)—our sources go back no further than the eighteenth century, and the bulk of the material is from mid-century, or later.

Of these, the first to be printed is Ranald MacDonald's anthology of 1776, commonly known nowadays as the Eigg Collection. Ranald was a son of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, the poet whose name is always linked with the Rising of 1745, and as such was a scion of the Macdonalds of Clanranald. I select this anthology not only because it affords evidence of the tastes of an eighteenth-century gentleman, but because the introduction, which is in English, gives us an insight to the motives which inspired the work.

'The Gaelic language,' it begins, 'now struggling for existence in a narrow corner, was once the mother tongue of the principal states of Europe. It was in particular, and for a considerable length of time, the only language spoken by our ancestors, the ancient Caledonians.'

MacDonald then goes on to trace the decline in the fortunes of the language, and the political causes behind this, until it was at last 'in danger of being entirely obliterated'. But

'at this critical period a fortunate event happened. . . . Some individuals, animated with the love of their native language, regretted the danger to which they saw it exposed. Compositions of great merit in the language were known to exist. Inquiry was made after these, with a view to publish them; and this was esteemed the best method of preserving the language itself. The inquiry was attended with considerable success; and a few years ago, some fragments of the best and most ancient Gaelic Poetry were offered to the public in an English translation, inspired with a considerable share of the majesty, simplicity, and elegance of the original composition.

The appearance of these Poems excited universal attention. The Highlanders, perhaps, were the only people in Europe whom they did not astonish. Independent of the beauty of their composition, they served to exhibit a picture of human manners so exalted and refined, that some persons, judging from their own depravity, could not believe the existence of the state it described. The general voice, however, declared in favour of the authenticity of the Poems; and the general voice has been supported by the opinions of men of genius and extensive learning. The delineation of Caledonian manners, exhibited in these poems, while it gratified the curiosity, commanded likewise the admiration of Europe. Men of taste and genius, in all parts have coveted an acquaintance with a language which could boast of the name of Ossian; and could triumph, almost unrivaled, in the exalted character of Fingal. Thus the love of the Gaelic has been revived; and a taste for Gaelic compositions has become general.

The Editor, moved by these considerations, and desirous to preserve his mother tongue, has bestowed much labour and expence, during the course of two years, in collecting the poems now offered to the public (MacDhomhnuill 1776:v-viii).

Such an explicit declaration needs no analysis. We may, in passing, note the importance of the Ossianic controversy as a stimulus to further collecting, and go on to observe that the urge to prove to the world at large—in the first instance, no doubt to the English speaking world—that Gaelic possessed an ancient and civilised poetic tradition may be read in, or from, other contemporary writings. It is, in fact, a manifestation, in the special circumstances of a minority culture, of one of the aspects of European Romanticism.

MacDonald intended his second volume, which never appeared, to demonstrate the antiquity of the tradition. 'Most of the pieces in the first volume', he writes, 'have been composed within the last two hundred years.'

There are 106 poems in all in the book, and not all of them are oral compositions. Some which are not may have entered oral tradition; others, which are, may have come to Ranald in writing. It would be tedious, and I hope unnecessary for our present purpose, to stop to prove that most of them, however, derive ultimately from oral sources of one kind or another. All in all—and including the uncertainties—one may claim that the contents of the Eigg Collection are not unrepresentative of the poetry gathered in that epoch.

The social ambience of much of the verse may be illustrated by a few titles taken almost at random from the first page of the Table of Contents. 'An Elegy to Sir James MacDonald; an Elegy to MacDougall of Dunolly; a Song to MacDonald of Clanranald who was killed in 1715; a song to Sir Lachlan Maclean of Duart'—and so on.

This is clearly a poetic tradition firmly set in the upper echelons of Gaelic society. It is to some extent what we might call a bardic tradition—a tradition of encomia: MacDonald himself expressly mentions 'the elegies on the deaths of prominent men'. But although authors are named who probably held bardic offices under clan chiefs, the focus of the verse as a whole is not so much on the relationship between bard and patron as on the set of relationships which constitute the fine—the relatively small aristocratic group which forms the upper stratum of Gaelic society in the later Middle Ages and down to the eighteenth century. This invests even the narrower bardic poetry with a certain humanity; but in any case the bardic is only one strain among many, and by the eighteenth century it is already on the decline. Indeed, it is only by emphasising—perhaps over-emphasising—a superficial stylistic uniformity, little greater than persists in many a written tradition over the same length of time, that I am at all able to present this body of poetry as belonging to one category. Divisions could be made in numerous ways, but here I shall merely indicate the scope of the verse by observing that the commonplace kinds-religious or moralistic, satirical, political, convivial, amatory, etc.—are all represented. One may add, however, metrical range as a factor in the variety, and that astonishing rhythmical subtlety that confers an individual distinction on poems composed in the same basic form, for this too is part of the total statement that a poem makes.

From the eighteenth century to the present day, this poetry that we are considering can be seen filling a double role in Gaelic society. One the one hand, simply by having them written down on a page, and by neglecting the musical component of the tradition—for all these poems were sung or chanted—because of these accidents of history, we can regard them as the first phase of our written, vernacular literature. (But the part

they play there does not, of course, concern us now.)

On the other hand, they continue in oral circulation—although the tradition is a progressively diminishing one-down to our own time. These examples from modern tradition vary a great deal textually, depending on the lines and circumstances of transmission. While Gaelic society remained stratified, what we may call primary transmission would probably be largely confined to a well knit group of native aristocracy and minor gentry, and to their immediate dependants, who sat in the sreath or circle with them. Transmission among the common people would no doubt vary, but one might expect a freer growth of variant versions at that level. One can certainly cite modern variants that show a high degree of mutation which seem to have had a long transmission in that form, e.g. a composite text based on a eulogy by Iain Lom to MacDonald of Sleat, composed perhaps in the sixteen sixties, and an elegy by Niall MhacMhuirich to Alan of Clanranald, who was killed at Sheriffmuir, in 1715. Yet one may also recover texts that are strikingly conservative, although it is not bookish influence that accounts for that, but the fact that the singers are descendants of bards, or of the gentry, or have had access to sources controlled by such people. The situation, however, is so complicated that no short formula can sum it up.



A Highland seanchaidh recites the descent of the boy king Alexander III at his inauguration at the Moot Hill of Scone, 1249. (From the MS of Jordan's History, early 15c.; Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 171. By permission of the Masters and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge). See p. 33.

The staple of the major collections, then, is a vernacular, oral, but 'official' poetry. And from internal evidence, from attributions of authorship—which are transmitted concurrently-and from an appeal to records, public and private, against which these facts can be checked, we can plot its history back into the sixteenth century. Now, very interestingly even our earliest poems display all the security of established practice. The tradition is clearly very much older than the sixteenth century. Sheer lack of evidence makes it improbable that we shall ever solve this question to our entire satisfaction; nevertheless, it is possible to lay down some guiding lines.

It can hardly be irrelevant to the issue that classical bardic poetry is much less strongly attested in Scotland than it is in Ireland. It is possible to think of several reasons for this.

Whatever orders of poet practised their art in very early Gaelic Scotland, the turbulence of events contingent on the founding of the early kingdom of Scotia, the long conflict with the Norsemen, and the aggressive Anglicising policy of the sons of Malcolm III can hardly have provided the ideal milieu for the high caste filidh. It is perhaps worth noting here that Anglicisation, or partial Anglicisation, of the eastern and northeastern areas of the kingdom is reflected also in the distribution of later vernacular

poetry.

Be that as it may, full court patronage must have been at least an uncertain thing as early as the twelfth century. We have one glimpse of what may well have been the last official appearance of a seanchaidh at the Scottish court—at the inauguration of the boy king Alexander III, in 1249. It is true that some of the Scottish authors named in the Book of Dean of Lismore may be descendants of families who flourished under court patronage, or under that of the great magnates of the kingdom, at an earlier date. But of the three families of professional composers of dán díreach who are most prominent in Scotland, and who survived longest, two—the MacMhuirichs and the O Muirgheasans -are in the nature of reinforcements from Ireland. And the late Professor Angus Matheson has shown that the ancestry of the third—the MacEwens—may be Irish as well (Matheson 1953–1959:203).

The emergence of the clan system as we know it in the later Middle Ages included a considerable number of units whose economic power was extremely limited. A clan chief who could not maintain a filidh might well be able, however, to maintain a bardrepresentative of a lower and less demanding order. And we know that there were

clan bards who composed in vernacular Gaelic.

But they were not necessarily all of the same order. Just as 'clan' does not always and everywhere in Scotland denote the same territorial and social unit, neither, one may suggest, does 'bard' always imply the same status. I think it is a reasonable inference that clan bards varied both in their functions and in the kinds of verse in which they specialised.

Where a bard acted as a reciter to a filidh he would be in a particularly advantageous position to fill the role of middle-man between the classical and vernacular traditions. His métier was in the vernacular; but he would be sufficiently conversant with classical poetry to draw on some of its resources and employ them in his own craft.

These resources would naturally include the rhetorical techniques, and the imagery, of encomiastic verse; but just as important is the establishment of a syllabic metric in vernacular Gaelic. By the sixteenth century Gaelic poets were already using syllabic metres in the vernacular with subtlety and ease.

In talking of syllabic metres, one ought perhaps to add that the multiplicity of syllabic forms in Gaelic is not necessarily to be derived direct from dán díreach. There are songs that probably derive from other sources, which are nevertheless sung with the same speech rhythm as dán is: a pattern that derives ultimately from classical poetry having perhaps been imposed upon them. The point is, however, that a feel for speech rhythm in verse is a very marked feature of Gaelic poetry—constitutes, in fact, one of its major and most sensitive graces.

To return to the bard. I am not suggesting that only professionals cultivated these and other forms. Indeed, it could be argued that it was only when they were taken up generally by lay poets of the *fine* that they developed their full potential. But the bard as intermediary between classical and vernacular must be given his own place. Other bards, free of the tutelage of any *filidh*, would have practised other forms, of which one was no doubt the metre that lies closest to the centre of the panegyric tradition—the unequivocally stressed verse that W. J. Watson called 'strophic'.

I have elsewhere speculated on a formal connection between the strophic poems and passages of rosg such as we find in Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó and in Serglige Con Culainn.

Such a connection would accord well with the facts on other grounds. Professor Calvert Watkins has shown in his paper on *Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse* (Watkins 1963:238) that short lined verse of this kind tended to be used for more popular types of composition; and such is what we would *a priori* associate with some of the lower orders of bard.

Recently the Rev. William Matheson has drawn my attention to the verses on Brigit in the Book of Leinster (Best et al. 1954:175-6) illustrating dían brecta centromm.

Brigit buadach buaid na fine siúr Ríg nime nar in duine eslind luige lethan breo

rosiacht naemnem mumi Gaedel riar na n-aiged aebel ecnae ingen Dubthaig duine uallach Brigit buadach bethad beo. It is significant that the two stanzas given here are of different lengths: this is a feature of strophic poetry. Moreover, Mr Matheson also points out, the Irish poem can be sung to one of the known Scottish melodies.

I consider this an important link in the chain of evidence: we can claim, I think, that we have at least a *prima facie* case for regarding strophic poetry as a peripheral survival of a very ancient form.

It is not, I believe, any longer used by traditional bards. It was closely connected with clan panegyric, which helps to explain its disappearance. It is rather interesting to observe how seldom it was employed for occasional verse—love poetry, for instance; and most religious poets, of whatever persuasion, took good care to avoid it.

The strolling bards, A' Chliar Sheanchain, as they are still known in the many anecdotes, printable and otherwise, that circulate about them, survived as an institution in Scotland at least as late as the seventeenth century, and probably in certain areas well into the eighteenth. In oral tradition they appear simply as a degenerate rabble, but here again there was variation in status. Some of their store of poetry seems to have been drawn on by the Dean of Lismore, and we may glance briefly now at the form in which this poetry appears.

The transliteration of the contents of the Book of the Dean by editors such as Watson and Ross show that the verse is dán díreach, though of varying degrees of strictness. But editorial reconstructions perhaps slightly obscure the fact that the verse, as presented by the Dean, is demotic dán díreach, considerably influenced by the vernacular. Now, if Watson is correct in his view that the Dean's poet brother Duncan MacGregor had a good knowledge of the classical tradition, it is difficult to see why he and his brother should have so altered his poetry, unless they were bringing it into line with an existing tradition of 'vernacularised' verse. I realise, of course, that other points of view are possible on this, but the problem is far too complex to tackle here. We can at least suggest that the Book of the Dean represents the confluence of two streams of tradition, oral and written, and that, in the form in which we have it, it looks almost like an early precursor of the popular paper-back.

I should like to turn now to consider other aspects of the oral tradition, of which the early major collections give us little or no account. It is quite clear that at least in the last two hundred years a great deal of ephermeral verse was composed—it was designed as such, and filled the need that was later provided for by mass media. One may believe that such a need always existed, even in heroic societies. We know from what Martin Martin has to say in the seventeenth century that the common people of the Isles were greatly given to composing—had, as he puts it, 'a quick vein of poesy' in them (Martin 1884:200).

But of all the kinds of song that the early collectors neglected or paid only little attention to, by far the biggest and the most interesting from any viewpoint is the category which nowadays appears to be centred on work. The connection with work,

however, is almost wholly a functional one: very few pieces indeed would require from the evidence of their content to be classified as work-songs.

I shall call them here, generically, choral songs: the refrain, which is a distinctive feature, and which may consist of words (at least in the more modern examples) or of semantically meaningless vocables, or of a mixture of both, demands participation by a group. We have evidence that communal labour, of more than one kind, was in the past accompanied by choral song; in our own time, it is as an accompaniment to the task of 'waulking' or fulling cloth that they have best survived.

But we have evidence that they were used as entertainment as well. 'When the same airs are sung in their hours of relaxation', writes the Rev. Patrick MacDonald in the preface to his Collection of Highland Vocal Airs of 1781, '... one person leads the band; the rest strike in and complete the air to a chorus of words and syllables generally of no signification' (MacDonald 1781:10).

Both men and women joined in this; and although MacDonald distinguished between songs used for male and female occupations, it is clear that he is thinking in terms of one broad category. These choral songs are all short lyrics composed mostly by women.

The refrains, especially the meaningless vocable refrains, may well be the most primitive part of them—they are certainly a relatively stable element in a very unstable body of texts. At anyrate, we seem to have here an obscure core of song round which there have gathered various crusts of accretion. Indeed, one may even find Ossianic ballads broken up into the requisite metrical units, interrupted by refrains.

In an interesting paper which appeared some years ago in *Éigse*, Mr James Ross discusses some of the peculiarities of this tradition. Mr Ross distinguishes between 'the poetic metre and the song metre (Ross 1953-55:219 ff), and is concerned to show that the song metres simply deploy literary metres in a different arrangement. Without going into the various permutations, one may say that the literary metres appear in song as couplets, single lines, or even half-lines.

The most arresting literary form which this study reconstructs is an irregular stanzaic form; when it is written out without the refrains, one could describe it as a paragraphic structure. Mr Ross draws a comparison between this and the structure of the *Gododdin*, and adds: 'This relationship between Welsh medieval poetry and Scottish Gaelic folk poetry is made more striking by the fact that the ... metre ... seems to be unknown in Ireland' (Ross *ibid*.).

This most interesting suggestion deserves to be taken out of the realm of conjecture; but my concern at the moment is with the structure of the songs as they are sung. There are doubtless a variety of ways in which the introduction of refrains into poetic metres could be accounted for—in the Eigg Collection there is an example of a syllabic quatrain poem with a refrain of vocables inserted where there may originally have been an instrumental accompaniment—but in the present context, we must surely posit the existence of presumably autonomous metrical units, which are prior to the division of literary structures and which provide the informative principle on which that division is made.

In other words, where we find a line of poem broken up into, say, half-lines for singing, we must posit a prior song form with self-contained metrical units which correspond syllabically or in stress timing with half the line of the literary poem. It is, of course, rather intriguing and suggestive of a certain involution so far as origins are concerned, that some of the literary forms can be divided precisely in this way; in some instances, it is clearly possible because of a caesura in the line; but it must be added that some lines can be divided only by violating the syntax. Now, each of these half lines either contains two stresses or is capable of bearing two metrical accents. It is tempting, therefore, to see behind this form, too, what Professor Watkins calls the Indo-European shorter line—what I have already alluded to in connection with the strophic metres. To suggest an ultimate connection between fairly humble work songs and socially much higher praise poems may seem incongruous, but in fact certain sophisticated, bardic compositions involving descriptions of travel by sea are actually called iorram—'rowingsong'. It is unthinkable, to my mind, that these panegyrics actually functioned as rowingsongs, but the use of the term iorram may reflect an earlier function of the metre or metres on which they are based.

Interestingly enough, one instance of the 'IE shorter line', which Professor Watkins cites, to show its association with an informal style of composition, is a work song—a song no doubt based upon mundane usage, though in the saga context attributed to the *des-side*.

Now, we know that rowing was *the* male occupation accompanied by choral song. In fact, the word *iorram* is occasionally used as a generic name for choral song.

This theory, that one strain in the choral songs may be connected formally with vernacular panegyrics, and that both go back to a common origin, may always remain conjectural; but so far as the bard's part in shaping the tradition is concerned, we have still one more fragment of evidence. In a poem traditionally ascribed to one Mac Beathaig, piper and bard—a low grade, clearly—to Mac Donald of Sleat, there occurs a passage in short double-stressed lines, the content of which is exactly the kind of informal praise poetry in which the choral songs abound.

We may now look beyond the work-song ambience, and ask if there is evidence of any other function for choral songs.

The oral tradition of Uist has preserved the memory of a small clan battle fought in North Uist in 1601. In the battle, Domhnall mac Iain 'ic Sheumais, the leader of the victorious side, was wounded. His foster-mother, so it is said, gathered a band of girls and set off for the scene of the battle, composing a panegyric on the way. This she sang to the wounded man, while the girls sang the refrain. (There are slight variations in tradition—I have given only an outline here.) The song which she is said to have composed is still known and it is a choral song.

Now, this isolated fragment of tradition, transmitted merely as an incidental item in the account of a clan battle, would seem to be the only circumstantial description we have in Scottish Gaelic of the widespread practice of women singing a praise song

to a victorious warrior. But from Ireland we seem to have in the tantalisingly brief reference to the cepóc mentioned in Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó an allusion to the same type of composition. We may also notice here an interesting entry in the Wardrobe Accounts of Edward I of England, detailing a payment made to seven women in Strathearn during the King's journey through Scotland in 1296. These women, who 'came out to meet the king... and sang before him, as they used to do according to the custom of the time of the Lord Alexander, late King of Scotland' (Bain 1888:475), were almost certainly the same kind of bannal—the band of girls—as sang for Domhnull mac lain 'ic Sheumais in Uist 300 years later. The word cepóc survives in at least one dialect of Scottish Gaelic in the form ceapag, 'am improvised song, a ditty'; such panegyrics might well have been partly improvised. It is interesting that, as O'Curry pointed out long ago, the cepóc may indeed have been regarded at one time as specifically Scottish. However that may be, the singing of such groups would naturally be choral. Is it a complete coincidence that the line of the cepóc quoted in Scéla Mucce—Fer Loga mo leman-sa—can be fitted quite easily into the metrical scheme of Gaelic choral songs?

The erotic strain in the choral tradition is so dominant as to demand some attention. Now, a connection between erotic, lyrical songs and the dance is a very old and well canvassed one, although the theory is nowadays largely out of fashion. The reaction against the 'danced-song seasonal festival' theories which culminates in Louise Pound's Poetic Origins and the Ballad has influenced areas of scholarship far beyond the scope of Miss Pound's thesis, which is concerned primarily with theorigins of the medieval and later narrative ballad in the Germanic languages. It would be idle to deny—and Louise Pound herself never attempted to deny it—the connection between dance and song:it is a widely distributed, and perfectly authenticated phenomenon. But so far as Gaelic is concerned there are two problems to be faced.

- 1. There is no evidence of native choral songs accompanying indigenous dances; for instance, seasonal or fertility dances such as Cailleach an Dùdain appears to be.
- 2. There is no native word for 'dance'.

The second objection can partly be countered simply by pointing to the existence of a dance like Cailleach an Dùdain or of solo dances like Mac Iain Dhìrich. If these were borrowed, where were they borrowed from? Certainly not from England or France.

Dancing is a fundamental human activity and it seems unlikely that the one or two indigenous dances that we have comprise the sum total of all that existed. It is much more reasonable to suppose that old forms were displaced by new, and that dannsa supplanted the native word or caused it to shift in meaning.

If there really was a tradition of danced song in Gaelic, we would expect it—at least if we follow the old theory—to be connected with seasonal and other festivals. It is significant in this connection that the material gathered by Miss MacNeill in *The Festival of Lughnasa* shows us that dancing and match-making were constants of these festivals, at least in modern times. Now even if the forms of dance that are described are modern, can anyone believe that this is not a very ancient practice?

Match-making choral songs, as it happens, are of central importance in the modern hadh. It could be argued that this is, as it were, their proper environment, but it seems to me more natural to explain them as one of the accretions.

Now, Dr Ó Tuama in his brilliant book An Grá in Amhráin na nDaoine doubts if the idea of a 'chorus' is native to Gaelic. For Irish he points out that only in Ulster is there a Gaelic word that expresses burden or chorus—the word luinneog, Scottish Gaelic luinneag (1960: 215).

In Scotland luinneag nowadays means little more than 'a ditty, a light song'; but it is clear that earlier it did denote a refrain, and particularly a refrain involving meaningless vocables, which points to a choral refrain. And the Rev. Patrick MacDonald in the preface to his Highland Airs uses luinneag as the generic term for women's choral songs. All this shows that for Scotland at least the idea of chorus is deep rooted and suggests that it may indeed be a native one. At all events, the alternative theory raises more problems than it solves. I would like to suggest, very tentatively, that luinneag is to be connected with luinne—'vehemence, ferocity,' etc.—and as such could conceivably denote the performance of a song in a situation such as the dance would provide. Professor Jackson has argued that, in the early Welsh englyn, incremental repetition can best be explained by the old dance theory, or at least by a theory such as improvisation between two individuals or groups (1941:315). Verse contests, which feature in Gaelic choral song, and are explained as improvisations at an actual luadh are much more likely to have been composed outside the work-song tradition altogether.

In one or two places, one finds that a chorus of vocables is called *Tuireadh*, 'lamenting', which suggests perhaps that keening, or some form of keening, employed choral refrains. A large number of choral songs are laments: many of them, as is natural in maritime communities, laments for men lost at sea. But both the evidence about professional keening in the past and the apparently spontaneous performances of a more recent time force one to put keening, if only provisionally, in a separate class. (Where keening has survived until recent times, the word, incidentally, is not caoineadh, but caoidh.)

Are the love themes, one may now ask, derived from early French in the manner that Dr Ó Tuama has argued so persuasively for Irish popular love poetry? Personally, I am inclined to think not, on the whole, and that any influence from medieval French—or English—lyric poetry is secondary.

W. P. Ker, writing on the Danish Ballads at a time when it was believed that the carole was the only progenitor of lyrical poetry and narrative ballad alike in the whole of north-western Europe, was slightly puzzled. The ballads, he says, have discovered a form of poetry which is alive. 'It is a lyrical form, and, though it was a borrowed form from France, it seems to have taken up, like a graft rose on a briar, the strength of an obscure primitive stock of life, so that the English and the Danes and their kindred were able to sing their own native thoughts and fancies to the French tunes. This may sound mysterious, but it cannot be helped. A mystery may be a positive fact, like any other' (Whibley 1925:95).

It seems to me more than likely that these Scottish Gaelic songs present us with at least part of that stock on to which the French rose was grafted.

I must now turn to consider a less delicate flower. There are in Gaelic verse two distinct strains of bawdry. One, curiously enough, is associated with the words of dance tunes, and though the melodic forms are modern, one wonders if this is not an old tradition of erotica, but one which exists now in caricature. If so, we do not know what the models were.

Although there are numerous declarations and prohibitions by the Church all over Europe against cantilenae and the like, we seldom or never have any evidence of what the actual songs were. For instance, in 1596 the Kirk Session of Elgin records that 'Magie Tailzeour . . . Elspet Beig . . . Magie Thomsoune . . . confessit thame to be in ane dance callit gillatrype, singing a foull hieland sang . . .' (Cramond 1908:40). But, naturally enough, it is not transcribed.

The other repository of bawdry is the verse contest, sometimes represented as being between the *Cliar Sheanchain* and a known poet, sometimes between two named poets. This can hardly be unconnected with the literary 'flyghtings' of Lowland Scots, of which the most famous is the Flyghting of Dunbar and Kennedy. And Kennedy, it should be noted, is regarded in the flyghting as a Gaelic speaker, which he probably was, being a native of Carrick in Ayrshire.

The contests are also examples of spoken, not sung poetry, and traditionally they are said to be ex tempore compositions. No bard was worth his salt who could not improvise at least a quatrain. But it is important to stress, particularly in view of the oral formulaic theory, that Gaelic oral poetry is not markedly formulaic and that what is represented as ex tempore composition is perhaps the least formulaic of all. This is not to deny the existence of rhetorical techniques that employ an inherited store of imagery—but that is another matter. I suggest that a good deal of work still needs to be done on the oral formula; and, in this connection, I welcome the severely sceptical approach adopted by Dr Douglas Young (1965: passim). Any modern unlettered bard will very quickly point out the short-comings of the theory to an interested listener, either by precept or example. Recently, a colleague and I had the somewhat startling experience of being addressed for the best part of twenty minutes in impromptu song by a man at whose home we had both called unexpectedly, and for the first time. Yet even this composition was not conspicuously formulaic, let alone made up of formulas.

The ability to improvise verse in this manner is explained by the composers themselves simply as a hereditary gift. The belief that a poet is born, not made, is extremely strong, and a curious aspect of the belief is that very often a bard will stress the fact that his gift comes to him from his mother, or from his mother's people, sometimes even when his father's family seems also to have included bards. The instances of this that I have noted may, of course, be of no special significance; on the other hand they may be related to the belief that transmission of charms, and possibly occult knowledge in general, ought not to be transmitted by the initiate to a person of his or her own sex.

Apart from this possible mystique, however, there is nothing particularly esoteric

about transmission. But there is one curious and well-established belief which may be worth mentioning: that is, that a bard cannot be sued for slander or libel uttered in his poetry, provided his name is in the 'Book of the Bards', Leabhar nam Bard. This term, however, has no denotation. The idea is simply that the bard must have been officially recognised as a poet: for example, if he had been charged with some crime, and had had his profession entered in court records as 'Poet', he would from then on enjoy a kind of diplomatic immunity. There are numerous anecdotes told in connection with this—always involving the composition of satires, frequently addressed to girls who had spurned the bard's advances. One of these stories relates how a bard from the island of Mull, hearing that he was about to be served with a summons, came to Edinburgh and proclaimed himself publicly at the Mercat Cross as a poet. As soon as this news reached Mull the case was dropped.

This notion of immunity in regard to satire is probably the last reflection in Scottish oral tradition of the privileges of the poets.

At least, if there are other beliefs still current that invest the bard with powers other than those of skill in language, we have not so far recovered them, with perhaps one possible exception. Among a number of outstanding poetesses in Gaelic, there are two, both of whom were born in the seventeenth century and died in the eighteenth, in whose legends there seems to be a slightly sinister element. One is Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, the other is Maighread Ni Lachainn. Mairi never married; nor, according to some traditions, did Maighread. This in itself is at least eccentric in that kind of society. Both of them, it is said, went around accompanied by a woman who seems to have acted as an assistant, one of whose functions was to make up choruses of vocables or to set her mistress' song to a melody. Both women, it is said, too, were buried face downwards.

These are the legends, but no contemporary seanchaidh, so far as I know, can explain them further. There is, however, another tradition which may have a bearing on the matter. Long ago in the Islands, it is said, if a boat went missing, a wise woman was consulted. She was of mature years, unmarried, strong-minded, and she, too, had an assistant. The woman went to sleep, and while she slept, her spirit went out to search for the missing boat. But, if the wind changed while she was asleep, she lost her reason.

Now, this seems to me to be a fairly straightforward description of shamanistic trance and the recovery of hidden knowledge. May it be that some vestige of the poet-seer's practices lingered on in Scotland into the eighteenth century?

I cannot dismiss Maighread Ni Lachainn without mentioning the circumstances in which she composed her poems. Not with eyes covered, and a stone on the belly, as the *filidh* (according to Martin Martin) composed, but indoors, nonetheless—she simply could not compose out of doors. And at the proper moment, she saw her poems running along the green turves that formed the intersection of wall and roof. The phrase used by the seanchaidh who supplied me with this information was: A' feitheamh na bardachd a' ruith air na glasfhadan.

The oral tradition covers all this, and much more. In this brief survey, the actual

poetry itself has rather been lost sight of. It would take a great deal of time to demonstrate its qualities, for it enshrines the experience of a whole people. One would like to show that even bardic poetry is not necessarily dull, no matter how circumscribed its basic themes may be. It can sometimes have a laconic arrogance that is quite delightful.

From Diarmad have all of you come— An ancient line: A clan who are most deserving of praise That we have heard of.¹

Almost at the opposite pole stands the beautiful death-bed hymn of Duncan MacRury, the piety of which is not diminished by its delicate nostalgia for the flesh-pots.

Forgive us our sins—
We shall not be committing any more²

There is a good deal of what may, broadly speaking, be called satirical poetry in Scottish Gaelic. At one end of the scale there are flights of passionate invective; at the other one finds the true satiric humour of Rob Donn's elegy for the respectable misers, two brothers who died in the same week, a few days after turning away a poor person from their door, and who were laid in the same grave.

They were men who caused no dissension—So far as anyone knew—
Not did they perform one act
That the world calls grace:
But they were conceived and born
They were reared and they grew
A sweep of life passed over them
And in the end they died.³

But these are qualities that are to be distinguished by terms to which in the last analysis labels such as 'written' and 'oral' are irrelevant.

NOTES

- 1 See Watson 1932:172.
- 2 See Watson op. cit:236.
- 3 See Morrison 1899:50-

Daoine nach d'rinn briseadh iad,
Is e fiosrachal [sic] do chàch;
'S cha mhò a' rinn iad aon dad,
Ris an can an saoghal gràs;
Ach ghineadh iad, is rugadh iad,
Is thogadh iad, is dh' fhàs—
Chaidh stràchd d'an t-saoghal thairis orr',
'S mu dheireadh fhuair iad bàs.

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