John H. McDowell

CULTURAL EVOLUTION AND THE SINGING, DANCING THRONG: AN OBJECTIVE APPROACH TO INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Intellectual history tends to distort and often discredit the material upon which it practices. The insistence on orderly presentation inevitably organizes the thinking of whatever epoch under consideration into schools. These are, if possible, to be seen as polar opposites of one another. The oversimplification involved in the shuffling of diverse thinkers into a few imaginary "schools" must of necessity occasion great misrepresentation.

This is not to deny the possibility of one man's work exerting considerable influence on that of another, or even on the intellectual climate of his time. But rarely, if ever, are the lines as clearly drawn as the intellectual historian would have us believe. Any thinker of stature will most likely reflect, perhaps in unequal measure, all the dominant strains in the intellectual climate of his time. Thus the historian of ideas, by his very manner of perception and presentation, tends to violate the integrity of his subject matter.

This kind of distortion, however, is an artifact of method and perhaps unavoidable even in the best of all possible studies. A far more grievous fault, visible especially in the manner by which a discipline takes stock of its own history, is the practice of ridiculing theories and controversies which have lost currency in contemporary thinking. Not infrequently the ideas that were intriguing in days gone by are treated (or dismissed) as curious aberrations, or at best, infantile babblings on the road to maturity (often defined as the present state of affairs). This is, of course, to say only that men are mortal, and quite fallible in matters of perspective.

We could safely overlook this foible of the species but for a few pernicious effects of some consequence to our own endeavors. An attitude of cavalier superiority towards the thinking of the past not only deprives us of a genuine understanding of our intellectual roots, but moreover leaves us unable or disinclined to come to grips with the validity of our ideas, theories and controversies. We ridicule the strange notions of our predecessors, and assert our own lucidity, never pausing to notice that the perpetuation of this attitude condemns our own work to a similar fate in the years to come. For if this attitude prevails, scholars may well find themselves perusing our efforts with curious disbelief in a decade or two.

It seems to our advantage to take the work of former thinkers seriously, even to the point of experiencing (albeit somewhat vicariously) the force of the ideas they were attracted to. By developing a sense of perspective, we might better discover the limitations of our own work, correct as it must seem to us at the present time.

In the light of these moralistic pronouncements, I will now attempt to revitalize a line of thought emanating from a particular world view, both of which are currently rejected. The line of thought is Francis Barton Gummere's presentation and defense of the communal theory of ballad creation. The world view from which this theory issues is the evolutionary perspective on culture, perhaps best expressed in the writings of Edward B. Tylor. We will deal first with the intellectual background, then with the specific theory, and finally with the demise of the theory. As an epilogue of sorts, I will risk one last comment with moralistic overtones.

As the saying had it, the sun never set on the British empire in the age of Victoria. The educated Victorian, surveying the world from his arm-chair, or from actual administrative work in some corner of the empire, observed a great variety of primitive peoples coming into contact with their British conquerors. These people were as clearly human as they were different from the Victorians. The risk of British anthropology must be seen against this backdrop of the intensified colonial experience of the nineteenth century.

The evolutionary theory of the development of culture served two important purposes in its native historical context. First, the anomaly of these primitive humans was accounted for by supplying the prevailing world view (with its strata of aristocracy and commoners, and rights and duties attaching to each) with a time depth. Thus the primitives were seen to be antecedents of barbaric English peasantry still persevering in this otherwise civilized country.

This theory not only allowed for the sorting-out of knowledge about the world, but also gave its blessing to the harsh ways of imperialism, which after all were speeding the arrival of the day when all races would achieve civilization. This ethical dimension to the evolutionary theory was of considerable importance, since the Victorians regarded themselves as eminently humane.

My purpose here is not to fully explore the intricacies of the theory of cultural evolution, but rather to describe it as a system of thought in which the communal theory of ballad creation is embedded. Tylor's summary of the theory of cultural evolution runs as follows:

> Human life may be roughly classed into three great stages, Savage, Barbaric, Civilized, which may be defined as follows. The lowest or savage state is that in which man subsists on wild plants and animals, neither tilling the soil nor domesticating creatures for his food.... Men may be considered to have risen into the next or barbaric state when they take to agriculture.... Lastly, civilized life may be taken as beginning with the art of writing, which

> binds together the past
> unbroken chain of moral
> (1930:18)

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> binds together the past and the future in an unbroken chain of moral and intellectual progress. (1930:18)

Having set up these broad stages in the life of man, Tylor goes on to indicate their continuity and overlap.

> In this way it is reasonably inferred that even in countries now civilized, savage and barbaric tribes must once have lived. Fortunately, it is not left altogether to the imagination to picture the lives of these rude and ancient men, for many relics of them are found and may be handled in museums. (1930:19)

And further:

> So far as the evidence goes, it seems that civilization has actually grown up in the world through these three stages, so that to look at a savage of the Brazilian forests, a barbarous New Zealander or Dahoman, and a civilized European, may be the student's best guide to understanding the progress of civilization. (1930:19)

The central elements to the theory of cultural evolution as presented by Tylor in these passages are: (1) the three stages of man; (2) the necessary evolution from one stage to the next higher; and (3) the presence of relics of former stages even in the midst of civilization.

Francis B. Gummere, a classicist and literary critic, approached the ballad as an anomalous genre on the outer fringe of literary studies. The theory he constructed to resolve the conflict between a popular and a literary definition of the ballad drew heavily on two sources: classical poetics and cultural evolution. The general acceptance of his theory, by even such a scholar as George Lyman Kittredge, stands as a monument to the wealth of knowledge and critical perspicacity he brought to bear on the subject (see Sargent and Kittredge 1904:xi-xxxi).

The basic element in Gummere's theory, the choral dance, is a classical inheritance. Aristotle, in the Poetics, enunciates the classical view. Tragedy and comedy derive from the choral dance. In the case of tragedy, the dithyramb, a dance in worship of Bacchus, evolves over time into classical tragedy as he knew it. Poetry thus evolves out of the choral dance, in Aristotle's view, on the basis of two processes: (1) secularization, and (2) individuation. By the latter process is meant the gradual reduction of the role of the chorus, which nonetheless remains as a vestige of the dance (1927:17-19).

Gummere's celebrated "singing, dancing throng" bears strong resemblance to the choral dance. Gummere acknowledges his debt:

> Aristotle excluded choral song from...the valued file of verse; yet in these rude chants he recognized the origins of poetry itself. (Gummere 1959:19)

On the next page, he uses the expressions "chorus" and "throng" interchangeably.

Gummere states in the preface to The Beginnings of Poetry that he is concerned to trace "the rise of poetry as a social institution" (1908: 1). More specifically, he seeks to place the throng in a quasi-historical perspective, such that it can account for the development of English poetry (and of course the ballad). His unique contribution, therefore, lies in the attempt to lodge the classical notion of the choral dance within the major anthropological framework available to him. This cross-disciplinary correlation of ideas must have seemed an exciting application of the evolutionary perspective to a specific area of human activity.

Gummere situates the singing, dancing throng in the savage stage of mankind. He depicts this phenomenon as follows:

> A throng of people without skill to read or write...gathered in festal mood, and by loud song, perfect rhythm, and energetic dance, expressing their feelings over an event of quite local origin, present appeal, and common interest. (Gummere 1959:19)

Apparently two characteristics of savage man (as Gummere imagined him) foster this type of communal creation. The first is his homogeneous social structure. Gummere quotes Radlov in establishing the "almost inconceivable uniformity" of isolated savage tribes (1959:22). While Durkheim is not directly cited, the main outlines of Gummere's concept of the savage correspond nicely with the idea of mechanical solidarity, in which each member of the group participates automatically in the homogeneous world outlook (see Durkheim 1947:chapter 2).

A second characteristic of the savage, presupposed by his ability to create communally, involves his simple and direct cognitive processes. Something on the order of "mythopoeic thought," in Max Müller's formulation, is meant here (1909:68). Savages are said to have shared "social conditions under which the universal gift of improvisation was still mainly unchecked (Gummere 1959:22). Gummere's discussion of the savage mind draws heavily on the ethnology and anthropology of his time, and specific reference is made to the works of Tylor (1908:428 and 438).

The correlation of the choral dance and the evolutionary scheme represents only one facet of Gummere's theory of the rise of English poetry. Gummere also exercises his considerable analytic skill on the evidence provided by the ballads themselves concerning their origin. If the English and Scottish ballads originated in the choral dance, then it would seem plausible that some ballads might show vestiges of their communal origin. Gummere identifies these vestiges, and traces the development of the ballad genre through their gradual waning. In doing this, he draws again on the model offered by Aristotle, who in a simil
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> Eh vow bonnie,
> And they went out to pull a flow
> On the bonnie banks of Ford
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> They had'na pu'ed a flower but a
> When up started to them a banish
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> He's taen the first sister by th
> And he's turned her round and ma
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> "It's whether will ye be a rank
> Or will ye die by my wee pen-kni
>
> "It's I'll not be a rank robber'
> But I'll rather die by your wee
>
> He's killed this may, and he's l
> For to bear the red rose company
>
> He's taen the second ane by the
> And he's turned her round and ma
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> "It's whether will ye be a rank
> Or will ye die by my wee pen-kni
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> "I'll not be a rank robber's wif
> But I'll rather die by your wee
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> He's killed this may, he's laid
> For to bear the red rose company

model offered by Aristotle, who in a similar vein accounted for the emergence of Greek tragedy.

The main holdover from communal genesis still to be seen in the ballad as it has survived is the refrain, which "establishes beyond all doubt...the choral origin" of the ballad genre (Gummere 1959:73). The refrain was primarily a rhythmic element which allowed the dancers to coordinate their movements. It had no referential meaning. Refrains are found in many of the Child ballads and mark these as being of older pedigree than companion ballads lacking a refrain. The ballad genre came into existence when the refrain ceased to be the only vocalization in the choral dance. The singing, dancing throng gradually began to insert brief narrative snatches between repetitions of the refrain. At first these bits and pieces of narrative were highly repetitive. As the genre matured, they became less so, until finally the importance of both the refrain and repetition was greatly reduced, as we note in the more recent specimen of the genre.

In order to see how this analysis operates, let us consider the ballad "Babylon," or the "Bonnie Banks of Fordie," which Gummere cites as an "admirable specimen of communal elements and traditional form blended with incipient art" (1908:195).

There were three ladies lived in a bower,
Eh vow bonnie,
And they went out to pull a flower,
On the bonnie banks of Fordie.

They had'na pu'ed a flower but ane,
When up started to them a banisht man.

He's taen the first sister by the hand,
And he's turned her round and made her stand.

"It's whether will ye be a rank robber's wife,
Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?"

"It's I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
But I'll rather die by your wee pen-knife."

He's killed this may, and he's laid her by,
For to bear the red rose company.

He's taen the second ane by the hand,
And he's turned her round and made her stand.

"It's whether will ye be a rank robber's wife,
Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?"

"I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
But I'll rather die by your wee pen-knife."

He's killed this may, he's laid her by,
For to bear the red rose company.

He's taen the youngest ane by the hand,
And he's turned her round, and made her stand.

Says "Will ye be a rank robber's wife,
Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?"

"I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
Nor will I die by your wee pen-knife."

"For I hae a brother in this wood,
And gin ye kill me, it's he'll kill thee."

"What's thy brother's name? Come tell to me"-
"My brother's name is Baby Lon."

"O sister, sister, what have I done!
O have I done this ill to thee!"

"O since I have done this evil deed,
Good shall never be seen o me."

He's taken out his wee pen-knife
And he's twyned himsel o his ain sweet life.
(Sargent and Kittredge 1904:26-27)

As Gummere suggests, this ballad lies midway in the evolution of the genre from communal refrain in the choral dance to the more sophisticated examples of recent times. The presence of the refrain "Eh vow bonnie," which repeats after the first line of each stanza, links this ballad to the source of all ballads, the singing, dancing throng. The commonplaces which occur throughout this ballad and others, such as "For to bear the red rose company," indicate a more refined development of the genre. These commonplaces, and the repetition of lines (especially the incremental repetition as the brigand goes from one sister to another) are the means by which the throng was able to intersperse narrative material between repetitions of the refrain. These three elements then, the refrain, the commonplaces, and the repetition, mark the earlier stages of the emergence of the genre.

Nonetheless, Gummere finds elements of incipient art in this ballad as well. Most striking is the dramatic reversal of the last six stanzas. Also suggestive of incipient art are the compounding of simple motives, and the presentation of dialogue. Thus "Babylon" illustrates both the communal origin of the genre, and its subsequent development towards art.

Returning again to Tylor's framework, we can see that Gummere places the emergence of the ballad genre (and its cultivation in England and Scotland over several centuries) in the barbaric stage of human civilization. The ballads as we find them today are survivals of the barbaric stage, since none of the original choral ballads have survived intact. As man enters the barbaric stage, the prerequisites for communal creation are lost. The homogeneity of social structure is greatly reduced, but of equal importance is the loss of that native capacity to improvise which characterizes the savage. In its place comes the individual's effort to shape and order experience, the forerunner of the artistic impulse. The genuine artistic capacity not yet being fully realized, th
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(mimetic)	(mimetic)	
(refrain)	(refrain)	
	(occasional narrative)	
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capacity not yet being fully realized, the ballad continues to reflect communal concerns and attitudes. Incipient art allows for some degree of individual creativity, but the ballad remains subject to the standards of the illiterate and uneducated community.

Pursuing the evolutionary scheme to its relentless conclusion, Gummere affirms that civilization holds no place for the ballad. Popular ballads are dying out among the folk. The literary ballad as cultivated by modern poets is qualitatively different from the barbaric survivals. The ballad is, he says, "a closed account" (1908:163).

The diagram given below attempts to summarize Gummere's embedding of the communal creation theory in the framework of cultural evolution. Gummere felt that the choral dance also accounts for certain other genres of folklore. Riddling, and children's games represent adaptations of the throng in barbaric and civilized times, respectively. They are included in the diagram.

		(riddle)	(children's games)
choral dance - - -	proto-ballad - - -	ballad - - -	poetry
(mimetic)	(mimetic)	(refrain)	(literacy)
(refrain)	(refrain)	(repetition)	
	(occasional narrative)	(commonplace) (narrative)	

savage- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - barbaric - - civilized

Two salient shortcomings of the communal theory of ballad creation allow us, with some assurance, to set it aside. First, Gummere never provided any realistic measure of time for his theory. The singing, dancing throng harks back to some dim savage age, presumably before the thirteenth century when the first ballad texts are recorded. The choral dance remains shrouded in a haze of indeterminate time, much like the "prior time" found in many mythologies. Partly for this reason, perhaps, D.K. Wilgus labels the communal theory an "etiological myth" (1959:12).

Secondly, Gummere failed to produce a thoroughly convincing picture of his key construct, the singing, dancing throng. In some cases, his descriptions discredit themselves, as in the following reference to the dancing tradition in the Faroe Islands:

> They could also make a new ballad, in most dramatic fashion, at the dance; as, for example, when some fisherman has had a mishap with his boat, sturdy companions push him out into the dancing throng, and first one and then another stanza is improvised upon the fatal theme, until a complete story of the situation, with much repetition, we may be sure, uproarious refrain, and considerable dramatic action, is attained. (Gummere 1959:24; emphasis added)

The authorial attitude conveyed in this description, especially in the words "sturdy" and "uproarious," is something short of serious, if not downright patronizing. His framing of the episode as something quaint and curious, his caricature of the situation, makes it difficult for the reader to take it in earnest. Since the throng was a hypothetical construct, inherited from classical poetics and not fully coinciding with anything in the ethnographic literature available to Gummere, he himself must have been at a loss to depict in any great detail its character and operation.

However, since the ballad genre does indeed pose a number of problems, such as the anomaly of its commonplaces, refrains, and repetition, the communal creation theory could not be scuttled until an alternative theory with equal explanatory power emerged. Thus it was not sufficient to attack Gummere's ethnographic foundation, and show as Louise Pound (1921) did, that primitives do in some cases create individual poems and songs. I would submit that the definitive demise of the communal theory came only with the insights provided by the work of Parry and Lord in Yugoslavia.

Milman Parry reflected the intellectual practices of his time in making a tentative equation between an irretrievable epoch of the past (Homeric Greece) and a contemporary instance (Yugoslavia) thought to be comparable to it in some important way. Tylor made a similar association between contemporary primitives and the former savages of civilized nations. The material gathered in Yugoslavia from the Serbo-Croation epic provided the first comprehensive view of an active tradition involving oral composition. The Parry-Lord formulation of the role of theme and formula in oral composition offers a more satisfactory explanation of the anomalies of the ballad (see Lord 1960). Their research made plausible, or even inescapable, the concept of individual creation. Only at this point, when another theory had rendered the communal creation theory obsolete, could the singing, dancing throng be retired from the field.

This paper has attempted to recapture something of the excitement of a theory which subsequent ethnography has shown to be untenable. I have attempted to frame this excursion into the province of the singing, dancing throng in such a way as to bring into relief a few problems central to the doing of intellectual history. In particular, I suggest that former controversies must be respected as valid within their native intellectual climate. I propose, if you like, an ecological approach to intellectual theory.

As a final comment, I would mention that if modern anthropology shies away from global theories, it also reluctantly forswears the possibility of providing answers to global questions. We might date this transition to the following observation of Franz Boas:

> It is safe to say that the critical study of recent years has definitely disproved the existence of far reaching homologies which would permit us to arrange all the manifold cultural lines in an ascending scale in which to each can be assigned its proper place. (1955:5)

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In closing, let it be noted that if Tylor and Gummere sometimes strayed beyond our willingness to follow, they did so in the pursuit of ultimate answers.

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