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The Silver Stallion

Amy Lowell rides like Joan
Under colored banners,
Flashing a thousand lights
From her two-edged sword.
Ezra Pound mutters darkly
Behind a Chinese veil.

And here one strikes the gravest fault in the book:
there is too much of Fletcher, Amy Lowell and Ezra
Pound in the poems.

If these first books are a bit discouraging, still

The winds are neighing
Amid the monotonous hills—

and the silver stallion may be not far away.

Oscar Williams

WHO WRITES FOLK-SONGS?

Poetic Origins and The Ballad, by Louise Pound. Macmillan Co.

Just when and how the theory of the communal origin of folk-song, and hence of poetry itself, came to be evolved, I do not know. But for many years students of folk-lore have held tenaciously to the idea that folk-poetry is of crowd origin—i. e., the spontaneous improvisation of many minds, preferably during a dance or some community festival.

The idea is very like, and no doubt based upon, that similar “play-instinct” theory of the origin of art—a theory which saw nothing incongruous in the analogy between creative effort and a sportive calf’s jumping!

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To me the belief that the genesis of poetry, or of rhythm, was in the "hand-clapping and thigh-slapping" of primitive people during a dance has always seemed unnecessarily far-fetched. As if man were outside creation, and some special arbitrary means had to be devised for inculcating in him the laws of that world of which he is a part! And also, how account then for the genesis of space-rhythm? Did the primitive potter and artist evolve their volumes and lines to a similar bodily accompaniment? And should the artist today, who wishes to regain the old simplicity, take a twirl or two and jump like Nijinsky between each stroke that he gives to his canvas?

Miss Pound does not attempt to explain psychologically the beginnings of poetry. Her method is historical, and she adheres very strictly to the task she has set herself, which is to show: that the classic English and Scotch ballads, such as are preserved in the Percy and Child collections, could be only the work of individual poets, and not of a crowd or "festal throng"; and that the accepted belief in the communal origin of folk-poetry thus falls down, so far as it is based specifically upon these ballads. Miss Pound then uses the evidence of the living folk-poetry nearest at hand—that of the American Indian, the Negro, and the cowboy—to show that it too is almost always of individual authorship (and most markedly inferior when, presumably, it is not); but that it is, in any case, of a character essentially different from the Child ballads, these latter being of a much higher artistic

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order and obviously the work of individual poets above the peasant average, whether in that time or this.

One chapter seems to me to be missing from Miss Pound's book which would make it finally conclusive: a chapter on the medieval troubadours of the Continent. With this as a background, the conviction that the Percy and Child ballads must have been the work of individual authors, who held as stock-in-trade the poetic traditions of an older guild of minstrels and entertainers, would be inescapable.

Apart from the specific problem of comparison involved, Miss Pound's summary of the origins of our indigenous folk-poetry is exceedingly interesting. Beginning with the poetry of the American Indian, she shows that the individual poet is as well known in the most primitive tribe as in our own more sophisticated society; and that there is no evidence that Indian poetry, although communally sung, is so composed. She shows also that many of the Negro spirituals are based upon the white man's hymns, from which their form and substance are largely derived. Thus although the individual authorship of the spirituals may be lost sight of, their parentage at least is not of crowd origin; and the additions made by the Negro congregation in singing these songs are mostly in the nature of refrain.

As for the American cowboy songs, for which Mr. Lomax has claimed a communal origin, Miss Pound shows that almost all of these are of known authorship; although

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she does not on this account deny their genuine folk character, nor (as Professor Gerould in the New York *Evening Post* implies) discount them as mere "derelicts" because they have been based upon earlier songs or adapted to familiar tunes. On this score one would have to call many of Burns' poems mere derelicts, and discard with them as well a large body of accepted folk-songs.

But Miss Pound's definition of folk-poetry is perhaps wider than many folk-lore scholars will accept. She says:

All types of song are folk-songs, for the literary historian, which fulfil two tests: the people must like them and sing them—they must have "lived in the folk-mouth"; and they must have persisted in oral currency through a fair period of years. They must have achieved an existence not dependent upon a printed original. . . . Whatever has commended itself to the folk-consciousness, and has established currency for itself apart from written sources, is genuine folk-literature.

By this she does not mean, of course, that the song must never have had a printed origin, but that it must have become independent of this by being transplanted into the folk-memory. If the folk-lore scholars object to the inclusiveness of this definition, they will have to admit that many of their own restrictions would, if collectively applied, rule out practically the whole body of accepted folk-song, including the classic English ballads.

Thus, if known authorship discounts the term "folk-poetry," then the poetry of the American Indian is not folk-poetry. If printed sources are not allowed, then all the old ballads collected in broadsides or chap-books must go. If the fact that *The Cowboy's Lament* was adapted

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from a popular Irish song of the eighteenth century makes its folk pretensions insecure, then *Barbara Allen*, which was also a stage song, will have to be discarded. In fact, if all the arbitrary barbed-wire fences of the folk-lorists are heeded, what will be left of the open range of folk-song? The professor of folk-song, like the melancholy cowboy, will have to go.

We are faced then with the necessity of accepting a wider definition of folk-song; or we may be brought to the pass of confessing that there is no such thing—there is only poetry, of various kinds. Also it may as well be admitted that folk-songs are as diversified in character as any other kind of poetry; and it is impossible to make any one type the “norm” to which all other examples must conform. Certainly the classic English ballads can not—as is too often done—be made the touchstone of what is or is not folk-poetry. Theirs is a highly specialized form; their authors were undoubtedly fairly sophisticated poets; and we have every right to believe that the ballads became folk-songs by the well-known process of descent.

In other words, we must recognize two broad sources of folk-song: one of the soil, as with genuinely primitive people like the American Indian (though none the less of individual origin); and the other of the stage, the church, the court, or the city, descending again to the soil and the folk, there to be rediscovered as folk-song.

Such ideas as these, presented by Miss Pound, are sufficiently radical to meet much opposition from the

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adherents of the accepted belief in the communal "crowd" origin of folk-song. But just one thing is needed from Miss Pound's opponents to prove her theory a house of cards, and that is some evidence of a crowd or group improvisation of the ballads, or of any poetry higher than the nursery-rhyme type used in games. Did anyone ever see it happen?
A. C. H.

CORRESPONDENCE

PROFESSOR PHELPS AND ROSTAND

My dear POETRY: William Lyon Phelps has set my nerves cringing—is it possible that a Yale University professor should write the silly pompous windy stuff about Edmond Rostand which appears in the April *Yale Review*!

What a pity, when the whole world is trying to get a clear insight into things, to read such trashy stuff! Fortunately we know better, but some Frenchmen may judge American criticism and clearness of perception by Mr. Phelps' oracular utterances. Note the wisdom of this:

Creative genius is the most valuable gift that man can receive.

Isn't this a wonderfully stamped medal?—

He is a poet and a playwright, but above all, he is a magician.

But I wouldn't care about Mr. Phelps' platitudes if he didn't pretend to judge France and French drama with the same sweeping alacrity. I shall not trouble you with a reply *en forme*. Suffice it to say that nobody here with