The Faroese Ballad, a Living Tradition

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While much has been written on the relationship between the Faroese ballad and the ballad of the remainder of Scandinavia and Western Europe, I have chosen rather to look at the Faroese ballad within the context of its significance for the Faroese today. Because the ballad is still a living force in the Faroes, it becomes at the same time more fascinating as an object of study and in a way more elusive, because no work on it can reasonably ignore its role in modern Faroese culture or its relationship to what one might loosely call the Faroese psyche. Christian Matras in his history of Faroese literature stresses that no one who has not a subjective knowledge of them, who has *experienced* them, can possibly really understand them: "The modern man who sits down to *read* the ballads and does not sing and dance them with all his heart and soul gets nothing out of most of them, he uses a yardstick which is suitable in other fields, but not here . . ." Descriptions of the ballad, by Heðin Brú, William Heinesen or, in a less poetic vein, by N. Djuurhuus in the two volume work on the Faroes published by Dansk-Færøsk Samfund in the 1950s all indicate the intensity with which the Faroese experience their ballads, and Heinesen talks of an almost cultic significance and sees the ballad as "on the plane also occupied by art and religion." His fiction provides ample illustration of how the ordinary people can find expression for sentiments which they are otherwise unable to put into words, of the depths of which they are perhaps scarcely conscious. The use of the Ballad of Benedikt to express thwarted and hopeless love in *Blæsende Gry* is an example of this. This is one instance of many in Faroese literature of the use of the ballad as a vehicle for profound emotion and it seems to demonstrate better than any sociological survey the extent of the influence of the ballad today.

One is reminded of a remark made by Erik Dal in his book on ballad research in modern Scandinavia, in which he observes that in order to survive the ballad must reflect an acceptable view of life. If it does not, then it will die out. It appears, then, that the Faroese ballad, dealing with "events" which for the most

part took place many centuries ago, somehow reflect a view of life which is still felt to be relevant in the islands today. Heinesen notes the effects of the sudden transition from the shelter of the trade monopoly to the open market which produced extremes of attitudes: "The barbaric element was predominant, and that means that people up here waver between conservatism and radicalism, without any shades in between." Obviously, if this is true, there is good ground for an epic poetry to thrive. There are, however, probably other, still more intangible reasons. Add to Heinesen's suggestion of the tensions caused by the abolition of the monopoly the rigours of life as it has been in the Faroes until the present day – and as it indeed very largely remains – and one has a perfect recipe for the continuation of a dramatic literature of the people, in which the dramas and rigours are given archetypal expression in the distant times and events to which Christian Matras refers in his history. They see their own situation reflected in them, and respond immediately and directly to them.

It may be that the response is also partly unconscious. The Ballad of Oluva, with which the dancing season ends, is partly felt by tradition to be an exortation to constancy on the part of the betrothed couples, many of whose unions have come about as a result of the season's dancing. But the refrain to the ballad is perhaps more significant than the narrative content:

Stigum fast á várt gólv
sparum ei vár skó.
Gud man ráða hvar vær drekkum
onnur jól.

(Tread firm on our floor/let us not spare our shoes/God must decide where we shall be drinking/when Yule come round again.)

The connection between this refrain and the actual ballad is only slender, and is really limited to underlining the tragedy of the story. However, as the refrain of the year's last ballad, repeated after every verse, it seems to stress quite literally the uncertainty as to who of those present is likely to be dancing there in a year's time. It is acknowledging the presence of death in a way which is surely of particular significance to a community

which still is composed mainly of seafarers of one sort or another, quite literally working under the constant threat of a disaster at sea. The dichotomy of life and death is stressed in other refrains:

Leikum fagurt á foldum

eingin treður dansin under moldum

(Let us play happily on the earth/no one treads the dance in the grave)

There is joy in life in this refrain, but there is also a keen awareness that life does not last for long, and there are other refrains upon which a similar interpretation can be place. Musicologists have pointed out that musically the refrain is the decisive factor in the ballad. It may well also be that it is of fundamental importance to the *effect* of the singing, even if it is not logically or directly connected with the action. This would explain why a number of refrains of this type are common to more than one ballad, the refrain not merely deciding the melody of the ballad (which it also does), but also expressing a view of life which lies, as it were, beyond or behind the action described in the text.

The refrain of the Faroese ballad when danced (as distinct from those used when it is recited in the *kvøldsætur*) is often much longer than those current in other Nordic ballads. It will usually be at least as long as the individual verses, sometimes longer, and only in a minority of cases shorter. Most, though not all, appear to be native products, and one comes again to the conclusion that a special significance should be attached to the refrain both because it *is* a native product and because of the emphasis which inevitably must be placed on it in the singing of a long ballad.

(If there is to be found a foreign influence on the Faroese refrains, it is thought by Grüner Nielsen to be the Icelandic Vikivaka poems, which were lyrical poems written between the Reformation and the end of the eighteenth century, certainly at a time when the Faroese ballad was flourishing.)

Further evidence of the importance and singularity of the Faroese refrains is to be found in the fact that they are often used in the many Danish medieval ballads which are sung in the

Faroes – usually taken from Anders Sørensen Vedel's *Hundredvisebog* and to a lesser extent from Peder Syv's collection. There seem to be two possible reasons for this, the first abstract and my own guess: that the Faroese refrains express the national psyche better than the Danish ones – they are native to the islands and an expression of the view of life there; – the second suggested by Hjalmar Thurén being again that the ballad melodies are dictated by the melodies of the refrains. There are not so many melodies as texts, he points out, and this results in the refrain becoming the fixed point in the ballad. Thus, he says, a Faroese will rarely say that such and such a ballad is sung to the tune of the Ballad of Sverker, but he will tell you which refrain is being used, by which he will immediately indicate the melody.

There is at all events a close relationship between the long refrain and the emphasis of the ballad, which is emphasised by the relationship between the long refrain and the actual musical structure, the verses moving without a break into the refrain and thence, also without any pause, into the next verse. All is closely linked to the dance, with its regular and simple steps which in their turn give the dancer the opportunity to express his emotions in his movements and his mime. The ancient cultic significance of the dance is apparent here.

All in all, the Faroese ballad as it stands today bears every sign of being a living tradition, a vehicle for emotion, for a sense of epic grandeur, for a sense of the brevity of life, and, not least, for enjoyment. There is every sign that, to keep to Erik Dal's definition, it still expresses a valid view of life.

Knap of Howar, Papa Westray, Orkney 1973

Anna Ritchie

Papa Westray is a small and fertile island in the northern part of the Orkneys. On the west coast of the island is the site known as the Knap of Howar, the visible remains of which consist of two well-built stone houses lying side by side. The