

# Getting Generic: An Introduction

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WHAT happens when a poem grows old? Or, to make the question less organic, what happens when a poem becomes dated, outmoded, obsolete? Obsolescence is a possible horizon for any poem's circulation, but it begins with the uneven popularity of all poems. Whether or not a poem is "popular"—something widely read and appreciated, but also something received as widely read and appreciated—is not just a result of its particular features or content, but is also an expectation always mediated by genre. Because in any historical period genres exist hierarchically across a system of mediations, their exchange and uptake are uneven and asymmetrical, as are their meanings in relation to other genres. The popularity that comes with widespread reading and circulation operates in tension with the stability that a more restricted literariness can provide. Popular poems become familiar, but then they become hackneyed, get parodied, and are replaced by newer popular poems. Ezra Pound deployed his famous line that "literature is news that STAYS news" to oppose what he took to be the planned obsolescence

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accompanying cultural mass production.<sup>1</sup> Old news, by his definition, was never literature. But what had made it old? The popular poem's path into tired dullness was not necessarily the result of an inferior artistry unable to hold up over time, as Pound understood. Quite the contrary: overfamiliar poems are often too memorable, and they provoke because they will not disappear. So, what happens to poems that get old? If obsolete things lose none of their vitality simply for being obsolete, then old poems don't die or fade away. Instead, they become ballads.

At least, that is one conclusion that arises from the essays assembled in this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. A ballad is not just one kind of poem with certain features like common meter, a refrain, a fragmented or episodic story, a communal perspective, and so on. Ballads are figurations for the popular that depend on prior assumptions of their archaism and outdatedness; their cultural value comes in part from an implicit belief that they have endured against rather than over time, regardless of when they were first written or created. This aura of the departed does not mean that ballads were (meant to be) ephemeral and fleeting—nineteenth-century writers, William Wordsworth most famously, often intended the reverse. But it does mean that ballads were news that stayed old by remaining already familiar, as Carolyn Williams's essay on parody and the ballad refrain, or Meredith L. McGill's characterization of "The Wreck of the Hesperus" as a "mash-up," make clear. In Williams's words, nineteenth-century ballad parodies made "the very effort to revive old ballads itself seem very old, turning one massive trend in nineteenth-century literary history upside-down, inside-out, and (especially) backward," while McGill demonstrates how ballads could help to "define the boundaries of literariness" because the nineteenth-century generic hierarchy separated ballads from poetry (the sudden emergence in the later nineteenth century of "Poems and Ballads" as a title or subtitle is another way to see this exclusion).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Routledge, 1934), p. 29. The business concept of "planned obsolescence" dates from the same period, though the term became more common in the 1950s.

<sup>2</sup> I take "generic hierarchy" from Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). I am also thinking of Leah Price's argument

Isolated in a periodicity that blended the timely with the anachronistic, ballads foregrounded their genericness in ways that other kinds of poems could not, providing a poet like Emma Embury, in Alexandra Socarides's reading, with a vantage point from which to critique the ballad's place in gender inequality. By "masking contemporary history in the guise of folklore," to use Virginia Jackson's phrase, ballads became, in the American context, a signal part of "the creation of poetry's modern life form, a form not incidentally forged in the intimate relation between post-romantic fictions of poetic address, late-nineteenth-century ideas of the ballad, and the racism that continues to haunt American poetics." And the elliptical temporalities of the ballad's repetitions and returns were matched spatially by its capacity to navigate the complexities of a variegated imperial geography: as Jason R. Rudy's essay shows, "markers of local or provincial identity" such as Scots dialect could "come to stand in for a more generalized national identity once one moves outside the nation" into colonial territories like South Africa, especially when deployed through a mobile and mobilizing genre like the ballad.

These are some of the concerns of this special issue, which while they emanate from questions posed by the nineteenth-century ballad, are also linked into a broader set of interests raised by historical poetics more generally. Put differently, these essays have both a shorter and a longer history. The shorter history is as follows: at a "Symposium on the Ballad" held in 2013 at the University of California, Irvine, ten scholars presented brief position papers each with their own take on the topics of the ballad, balladry, and nineteenth-century poetic culture; the five essays published here grew out of those initial eight-minute ripostes, with additional presentations by Max Cavitch, Tricia Lootens, Meredith Martin, Yopie Prins, and Eliza Richards. The following day, this time at the University of California, Los Angeles, the same group led a discussion of Thomas Campbell's wildly popular

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about format, genre, and cultural value in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), though her focus is on narrative fiction. Most work on genre focuses on one genre's changes over time, especially the ways in which it incorporates elements from other, typically more dominant genres. This is not my interest. My point is that no single genre can be understood historically without reference to the generic hierarchy of its period.

(and wild) but now unread 1809 poem *Gertrude of Wyoming*, a narrative in Spenserian stanzas by a Scottish poet about the American Revolution. Both of these events can be set within the longer-term project of the Historical Poetics working group, a collective of scholars studying transatlantic nineteenth-century poetry who have been meeting regularly since 2007.<sup>3</sup> The two events in May 2013 nicely illustrate the purposes of these meetings—to read collectively a nineteenth-century poem or treatise on poetry, to discuss questions important to nineteenth-century poetics (and by this I mean questions that were important to poets, critics, readers, and ordinary people in the nineteenth century), and to think in transatlantic terms about Victorian and nineteenth-century American work. One of the guiding premises of this group is that the nineteenth century holds an immense amount of learning around poetics that for complex reasons has largely been forgotten. One project is perhaps to recover some of this learning, and the following essays surely do this; but another important project is to develop methods for reading poems, and poetics, historically. Without the emphasis on reading, the work of recovery will necessarily remain inadequate. Together, these two efforts require contemporary readers of nineteenth-century poetry (but, by implication, readers of poems in any period) to rethink the social, institutional, and generic histories that have governed the reading of poetry then and now, including the determinations for what counts as poetry worth reading. The long-contested literary status of ballads as well as the challenges they pose to periodization, historicity, interpretation, and evaluation make them a good example with which to highlight these issues, which have lately provoked some controversy.

As I have indicated, one of the points developed in this cluster of essays is that ballads are generic to a greater degree than almost any other kind of nineteenth-century poem, and

<sup>3</sup> More information on the Historical Poetics working group can be found at their website, <historicalpoetics.com>, as well as in Yopie Prins, “What Is Historical Poetics?” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77 (2016), 13–40. The furthest beginnings of the group go back to a 2002 conference, “The Traffic in Poems,” organized by Meredith McGill at Rutgers University. Papers from that conference were published in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Meredith L. McGill (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2008).

this genericness, while it might often create a strong sense of sameness among ballads, also generates strong historical relations, even in the phoniest or most fraudulent imitations of the antique. In other words, the old-timey effects that most ballads evoke actually help them remain current. Thus the repeated recovery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a supposedly near-extinct balladry could promise the rejuvenation of literature through a return to older, simpler, more organic forms of expression because ballads had always been made to seem used, with a long history of imagined circulation and exchange that was inscribed into their social value. For this reason Susan Stewart has called them a “distressed genre.”<sup>4</sup> In her definition, distressed genres like ballads, fables, and epics stage antagonistic encounters between competing systems of mediation; they are made to seem old in order to capture “the voice of orality in all its presumed authenticity of context” for a literate and literary elite (*Crimes of Writing*, p. 68). One need not share Stewart’s outrage at this process of cultural enclosure in order to be convinced by her argument that archaism and obsolescence were never natural facts about certain genres, media, or texts, but were instead carefully constructed representations with specific effects on the generic hierarchy and the media environment of their moment.

Thus whether or not a ballad was a deliberate fraud or forgery, ballads were always already old, to play upon Lisa Gitelman’s words.<sup>5</sup> This imagined and imaginary agedness was a key outcome of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship, and a product as well of the media shifts that accompanied the expansions and accelerations of communication networks between 1750 and 1900. In the view of ballad scholar Francis James Child, printing could collect and preserve the songs of allegedly vanishing oral cultures disappearing in the wake of what he called “book-culture,” but, as several essays argue here, Child’s emphasis on the book, shared among a long tradition of ballad antiquarians, belied the unstable heterogeneity of

<sup>4</sup> See Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 66–101.

<sup>5</sup> See Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

ballads in public life.<sup>6</sup> McGill eloquently argues that ballads more typically appeared in broadsides, newspapers, and magazines, formats that heralded the intensification of print media in the mid nineteenth century. By the end of the century, new technologies for recording sound were deployed among rural, colonial, and indigenous populations to capture and catalog their songs, stories, languages, and ways of life, all threatened (materially and ideologically) by colonial and imperial violence.<sup>7</sup> These ethnographic uses for new media relayed back into the ballad's indexical methods of racializing populations discursively through dialect, theories about rhythm, and arguments about primitivism and archaism, such as those of Francis Barton Gummere or Louise Pound. The combinations of distressed genres, critical theories, and new media enabled the ballad to mark generically a set of ideas about cultural endurance while also being a means for marking comparative (and evaluative) differences among cultures and peoples. As Jackson's essay here starkly concludes, the racialization of this genre would have profound effects on the understanding of poetry in the twentieth century.

The fiction of the ballad's rootedness in an older time combined with the genre's imagined mobility to enable ballads to signify in a diverse set of ways, from parody to appropriation to authenticity to fakery. These essays make clear how nineteenth-century ballads could activate assumptions encoded into the hierarchy of genres in the service of social questions or sociality more generally. In other words, a nineteenth-century poem titled "Ballad" could, by way of its exemplary genericness, mediate

<sup>6</sup> See Francis J. Child, "'Ballad Poetry,'" *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia*, 1900," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 31 (1994), 214. On Child, see Sigrid Rieuwerts, "'The Genuine Ballads of the People': F. J. Child and the Ballad Cause," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 31 (1994), 1–34, which includes "Appendix: Two Articles by Francis J. Child"; and Mary Ellen Brown, *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece: "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads"* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2011). On ballad collecting, see Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014).

many, sometimes contested, social meanings (Socarides's and Williams's essays pursue this point explicitly, though every essay demonstrates it in a different way). The work done here therefore shows what can happen when scholars take nineteenth-century poetry seriously as a mode of knowledge and history—even, or perhaps especially, as the poems in question veer away from the literary canons that govern the reading of poetry, both in the nineteenth century and later. This critical approach is not simply about recovering lost authors, texts, genres, or contexts; it is also about reimagining poetics through a historically precise method, and therefore reconsidering questions of poetic form, reading, mediation, circulation, and address from (in this case) a nineteenth-century vantage point. The uneven literariness and self-conscious genericness (or, perhaps, phoniness) of the nineteenth-century ballad make it an ideal topic for illustrating a practice of historical poetics.

In this way, these five essays also make a sharper intervention into an ongoing discussion in the study of nineteenth-century poetry and poetics—namely, the debate over “new approaches to an old question: the relation between culture and poetic form,” as the editors of a collection on “Reading Historical Poetics” phrase it.<sup>8</sup> Recent books and essays by Jonathan Culler, Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Herbert F. Tucker, Derek Attridge, Simon Jarvis, and others have approached this question through a “return” to an intensified formalism that emphasizes “the autonomy and primacy of cultural history,” in which the literary historian attends “to the evolution of genre and form over the *longue durée* by reference to genre and form’s founding or originary features” (Adams, Calahan, and Hansen, “Reading Historical Poetics,” pp. 2–3). In some manifestations, this formalism generates a poetics grounded in idealizations of embodiment, in which, for instance, poetic meter is conceived in relation to the breath or heartbeat of a hypostasized speaker. In other manifestations, the work of form is modeled on a notion of “verse thinking,” such that the poem becomes a vehicle for realizing or understanding cognition and perception. Finally,

<sup>8</sup> V. Joshua Adams, Joel Calahan, and Michael Hansen, “Reading Historical Poetics,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77 (2016), 1.

the return to form also understands poetry by accentuating certain of its key ideological figurations, especially poetry's (imagined) relation with and metaphorical resemblance to music, or its material reliance on sound or rhythm.<sup>9</sup>

While much of this work in formalist poetics has generated beautiful readings of poems, it also depends upon a heavy investment in literariness as an abstract quality largely independent of other forces. Such reasoning places poetry and poetics beyond the bounds of history by treating "form"—the assemblages of textual or aesthetic features—as a quality of the poetic object rather than as a product of its interpretation or reading. This category error has had damaging consequences on the understanding of poetry, in that the formalist reading's hold on the poem depends upon the illusion of a false stabilization of terms, which locks it within the projections of the reader's own historically dependent position, typically that of a professionally trained expert working in some system of higher education. Because this type of reading began to be a norm in the 1930s (through the institutionalized work of disparate figures such as I. A. Richards, R. P. Blackmur, Reuben Brower, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren), most nineteenth-century poems have remained invisible to or unreadable by it. So while tracing "the encounter between popular and 'high' genres" may be important to some kinds of formalist analysis (Adams, Calahan, and Hansen, "Reading Historical Poetics, p. 3), the relative degrees of cultural authority, literary prestige, and "popularity" that differentiate poems are considered as essential qualities of them, rather than as the contingent outcomes of particular cultural moments.

The essays collected here swerve away from the formalist abstractions of the poetic and the literary by emphasizing genre rather than form. "Genre" means not only the set of devices

<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015); Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Poetry and the Thought of Song in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2015); Herbert F. Tucker, "Unsettled Scores: Meter and Play in Two Music Poems by Browning," *Critical Inquiry*, 41 (2014), 24–52; Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013); and Simon Jarvis, "Thinking in Verse," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 98–116.



a particular type of poem would be thought to include or the expectations that an author or reader might bring to it. Genres are not just categories in a taxonomy; they are also historical agents. Grasping them in this way demands a broader understanding of a period's cultural and material hierarchies, which interconnect different literary types with each other and with the various systems of mediation, circulation, and reading (among other things) that make literature historical. As these essays show quite convincingly, I think, a poem's meaning can come from its format (broadside, magazine, pamphlet, anthology, book) or from the institutions of its reception (schools, salons, taverns, workshops, music halls) as well as from its language. This approach tries to avoid the distortions that arise from artificially stabilizing any one term or concept, while providing methods with which to answer the question about culture and poetic form that keep in focus the relations and differences between a poem and a reading of that poem. Ballads became popular not only by dint of their form, content, and reception, but also as a projection of larger and longer literary, political, and social forces. The complex of forces that rendered certain poems popular also made them old, thereby making them generic, and thus turning (or returning) them into history.

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