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Variations and Transformations of the ‘Lenore’ Motif in European Ballads

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The paper attempts to discuss one specific context of the revenant theme in both popular and literary ballads of Europe. It tries to consider the similarities as well as differences in the function of the recurring motifs and images, and the variations in the development of the theme are viewed against the background of “the rites of passage” theory, and also of some concepts of the sublime.

1.

When the Czech Romantic poet K.J. Erben included the story of a spectral encounter with a dead lover into his collection of ballads, he pointed out “remarkable” similarities in the employment of “one and the same tale” among nations of different language and culture (Erben 1957 [1853]: 124). In the recurrence of the spectre’s bride theme, an ancient and influential pattern is developed and modified: the pattern focusing on the boundary between the self and the other, life and death, the natural and the supernatural, and on the experience of its crossing. In this respect, particular versions of the so called Lenore cycle can be considered within the frames of Arnold van Gennep’s “rites of passage” theory. They accentuate, in fact, the three phases of the ritual structure, referred to also by a number of other scholars (e.g. Victor Turner, Ronald L. Grimes, Mircea Eliade): the individual’s separation from his previous state, the transition, and the phase of incorporation into a new state; in other words, the preliminal, the liminal and the postliminal phases (Gennep 1997 [1909]: 19-20).

Central to all versions is the figure of the revenant, in the words of Aleida Assmann, “a wild and threatening form of a go-between” (Assmann 2003: 59), a mediator of the “liminal” experience, and also an embodiment of an alien, overwhelming force distorting the individual’s identity by working against his sense of self-preservation. The recognition of this force is allied with the motif of a real or symbolic death, of “the highest initiation ordeal”

(Eliade 1998 [1957]: 44), which redefines the individual's role and position, leading him through extreme physical and emotional crisis.

In accordance with the traditional concept of the ritual space and time, particular versions reflect a similar concern with the localisation of the life-and-death conflict. The notion of distance is supported by the theme of the journey, and the movement beyond usual physical boundaries is accompanied by the spiritual separation from the previous self. As J.B. Twitchell points out in his Introduction to *Romantic Horizons*, the simultaneous crossing of "external limits" and of a "psychological boundary of consciousness" represents a specific kind of experience, corresponding with the etymological meaning of the word describing it: the sublime ("sub"/ "under," "up from underneath," "below;" "limen"/ "threshold;" "limes"/ "boundary;" "limus"/ "sidelong vision") (Twitchell 1983: 3).

The hidden interactions between the liminal and the subliminal are suggested especially in the Romantic versions of the Lenore cycle. Their emphasis on the feelings of fear and powerlessness, on the notions of darkness and emptiness, echoes, moreover, the idea of the sublime as it is considered in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Though the atmosphere of terror, more or less, permeates through all versions of the cycle, there are differences in the individual response to it, and also in its connection with the three ritual phases. With respect to these differences, it is possible to distinguish between three particular groups of ballads, introducing also various types of the revenant figure.

2.

Echoing medieval superstitious beliefs, the image of a dead man summoned to Earth by his lover's grief can be traced back to the old Norse tale of Helgi and Sigrun, included in the *Elder Edda*. Developing a theme of a voluntary self-sacrifice, this tale provides a model for Scandinavian versions (Danish "Ange and Else," Swedish "Macht des Kammers") and also for the Scottish ballad "Sweet William's Ghost," which employs the motif of 'returning the troth,' of the ghost's attempt to re-enact the violated boundary. In these ballads, the desire for transcending the ultimate limit evokes a strong feeling of sublimity, which, however, strengthens rather than suppresses the notion of individual power and freedom. The later versions "Marjorie and William" or "Sweet William and May Margaret" concentrate on the dead man's passage towards the liberation from former bonds, and a further ballad "Fair Margaret and Sweet William" (with David Mallet's modernised version "William and Margaret" [1724]) returns to the idea of renewing the relationship with the other through death in a story of unhappy love.

Another pattern is worked out in South Slavonic, especially Serbian, ballads ("Jovan and Jelica"), centred around the motif of a dead brother. The loss of identity and a sense of helplessness connected with the brother's death is evoked through the image of an impassable distance between the place of the heroine's life after her marriage and her mother's home; through a violent split in the link between the present and the past, between adulthood and childhood. The wish of an impossible return reaches its fulfilment in the spectral journey, related to an old promise and initiated by angels, symbols of God's compassion. In the tradition of the revenant ballads, this employment of Christian imagery remains rather an isolated case, partly echoing Greek mythology. In Bulgarian, Albanian and modern Greek versions, the tension is sharpened by the inclusion of an additional motif of the mother's curse, a crucial driving force, which turns the revenant's apparition into the destruction of the whole family. A connection of the figure from beyond the grave with the idea of homecoming appears also in a Romance version "Les deux fiancés" and in a similar English ballad "The

Suffolk Miracle.” The description of the wild horseback ride (popular especially in German versions) dramatises the journey by suggesting the presence of irresistible fatal forces and evoking a supernatural anxiety, which is suppressed during the first phases of the passage to be fully expressed in the conclusion.

The destructive potential of the revenant figure and its connection with the terrors of transition is emphasised in the third group of the discussed versions: in the demon lover ballads. Here, the drama of identity and power reaches its highest level, drawing on moral and religious conflicts, and also on an ambiguous desire to reach unity with the other and remain separated (alive) at the same time. In the interplay of the threatening and transformative forces, dread forms the central theme, being supported by the image of a haunted and hostile space (e.g. in a Scottish ballad “Demon Lover”/“Carpenter’s Wife”). In the Romantic literary versions, which deepen the importance of all the three stages by connecting the sensational plot with a greater psychological insight, darkness and terror are incited from the very beginning (G.A. Bürger’s “Lenore” [1773], Zhukovsky’s “Ludmila” [1808] and “Svetlana” [1812], Mickiewicz’s “The Elopement” [1825] and K.J. Erben’s “The Wedding Shirts” [1853]). In English literature, the demon lover theme is developed in M.G. Lewis’s “Gothic” ballad “Alonzo the Brave and Fair Imogine” (as well as in the whole novel *The Monk* [1796], where it is included). Lewis’s connection of the revenant image with the motifs of unfaithfulness and revenge is further employed, for example, in “A Lily” by Mickiewicz and in “A Yellow Lily” by a Slovak Romantic poet Ján Botto.

3.

In the popular ballads, the descriptions of the preliminal and postliminal phases of the spectral passage may vary due to the fragmentary character of introductory and concluding lines, but there are striking similarities in the concept of the journey. The tone of the Lenore cycle ballads (especially those of the third group) is set by a repeated dialogue, which almost literally reappears in a number of versions and points out the fragility of both hidden and apparent thresholds, juxtaposing the nearness of the other world and the inability to recognise it.

“The moon is bright, and blue the night;
Dost quake the blast to stem?
Dost shudder, mayd, to seeke the dead?”
“No, no, but what of them?” (Ehrenpreis 1966: 73)

The importance of this dialogue in the discussed versions (the quoted example is taken from Bürger’s “Lenore”) corresponds with the interaction between the notion of the unknown and the sublime power of words (the language of magic and religion) and sounds in general. The power of sound over the human passions has been considered, for example, in Edmund Burke’s discussion of the sources of terror as well as of the effects of language; and Emmanuel Levinas points out the importance of hearing during the individual’s encounter with the other. Accordingly, the presence of alien forces in the Lenore cycle cannot be seen but is hinted at by mysterious (mostly animal) warning voices, and it is through sounds that the interference of the opposite force can be felt (the toll of bells in Icelandic and Austrian versions, and the frequent symbolic motif of the cock-crowing).

In 18th and 19th century literary ballads, the sound effects are employed in accordance with a greater emphasis on visual images. Both popular and literary versions emphasise the mutual correspondence between the experience of space and the perception of time. In the

medieval ballads, the distance between the beginning and the ending of the nocturnal journey is suggested through temporal references, which further imply (in accordance with the nature of the liminal experience) the idea of timelessness (a great number of versions highlight the number of years connected with the return journey). To create a similar effect, Bürger, Mickiewicz and Erben employ a quick succession of spatial images, and the discussed feeling of sublimity, linked to the transgression of the remotest horizons, can be also intensified by the visions of empty landscapes (Zhukovsky's snowbound plains, or the ocean expanses of "Demon Lover" and a Corsican ballad "Malia").

Within the medieval concept of time and space as a reflection of sacred and moral meanings, the landscape pictures mirror the revenant's true nature as well as the danger and terror of the journey. Gradation culminates towards the turning point and the description of the spectral figure is shifted to the concluding verses, drawing on the conventional images of death (some Dutch, German and Tyrolian ballads refer to the revenant directly as Death). The boundary between the two worlds is marked by physical thresholds (walls, gates, doors, bridges), which may either accelerate ("Malia," "Lenore") or prolong ("The Wedding Shirts") the process of transition (cf. Genep 1997 [1909]: 21). The association of the threshold motifs with death is accentuated by the final passage through a closed space (churches, mortuaries, cemeteries, graves), through escalated anxiety, which is considered (Eliade 1998 [1957]: 49) an inevitable part of initiation.

The movement from the liminal to the postliminal phases can be characterised by the difference between terror and "the horrid" (Burke 1909 [1757]: 122), between "an awful apprehension" and "sickening realisation" (Varma 1957: 130). According to Burke (1909 [1757]), the horrid "appeals to sheer dread and repulsion [...] and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual contact with the Supernatural." The "actual contact with the Supernatural," however, may be both petrifying and exciting, revivifying and annihilating. In a number of versions ("Demon Lover," Dutch and Prussian popular ballads, Bürger's "Lenore" and some of its literary and popular versions: Mickiewicz's "The Elopement," Zhukovsky's "Ludmila," Czech "A Dead Bridegroom," and Polish "Helen"), the individual's experience of hostile and threatening forces "robs" the mind of "all its powers of acting and reasoning" (Burke 1909 [1757]: 122) and the nightmarish moment of transgression can be connected with a motif of a physical disability (the loss of voice, the loss of consciousness, the inability to move).

The feeling of supernatural horror, however, may be checked by the discussed notion of another higher force: The symbolic meaning of the day time, pointed out by medieval versions, is frequently associated with religious imagery (the motifs of a godmother, of the church bells, or of the sacred objects, representing both religious and family ties). In Bürger, it is intimated by the name "Lenore," rooted in Arabian Ellinor and conveying the meaning "God is my light." An image of light is suggested also by Zhukovsky's "Svetlana" and by the choice of the name "Helen" in some of English and Polish translations of Bürger, for example, in Walter Scott's "William and Helen" (1797). From this point of view, in Lenore's revolt against God's order, the spectral figure of the revenant dramatises the eagerness of the mind "so entirely filled with its subject that it cannot entertain any other" (Burke 1909 [1757]: 81). Thus in the demon lover ballads, the preliminal experience is connected with the protagonist's separation from his previous social relationships (a loss of but also a self-imposed conflict with the family) as well as from the divine power, and protection (the motifs of magic, or also of ungodly, frequently unintentional, words).

This aspect of the preliminal phase is exploited especially in the Romantic ballads, which connect the supernatural conflict with the mind's capacity for appropriation, traditionally associated with the sublime (Burke 1909 [1757]: 46). An extended development of this theme can be found in "The Wedding Shirts;" in particular, in the emphasis on the individual's response to the clash of the contradictory forces in the final, postliminal stage.

The distinction between the death-like effect of despair and the life-giving effect of danger may also echo Kantian formulation of the sublime as a re-discovery of one's identity in the encounter with the life-threatening alien forces (Kant 1951 [1790]: 101). In this respect, "The Wedding Shirts" directly oppose the message of "Lenore" and also of "Demon Lover" or "Malia," where irresistible forces move the heroine from identity to otherness.

It should be added, however, that in its image of rescue Erben's ballad does not lose its disquieting power. As if modifying the gradation in "The Suffolk Miracle," where dread is intensified through subsequent knowledge, Erben's ballad highlights the feeling of terror through the escalated emotion of relief. And it further reinforces this tension in the concluding lines, which transmit the threat into the vulnerable world of possibility. A different approach can be discerned in Mickiewicz's "The Elopement," where the focus on the revenant's destructive influence partly loses its disturbing effect in the final image of a priest serving a mass for both dead lovers. Another suppression of supernatural anxiety, following the use of a rational explanation, can be found in Zhukovsky's "Svetlana," which locates the whole spectral encounter into a dream.

Dreams, and the atmosphere of the irrational, however, play an important role in the concept of identity in both popular and literary versions. They internalise the situation of fear, deepen the tension between the familiar and the unknown, and continue to incite the feeling of uncertainty by distorting all notions of firm and secure boundaries.

4.

To explore the initiation aspect of death as an essential condition of the individual's incorporation into a further stage of being, the Lenore cycle ballads unfold symbolic visions of Other worlds: "Demon Lover," for example, refers to the medieval metaphor "sailing to Sicily," suggesting the polarity between the Christian concepts of heaven and hell, which creates, in fact, the compositional pattern of Bürger's ballad and related literary versions. Other popular versions focus either on infernal images ("Malia") or on the pictures of Paradise (e.g. the reunion with dead ancestors in another Romance ballad "Ar breur mager"). In accordance with traditional ritual meanings, the religious imagery in the discussed ballads enters a wider psychological space, ranging between innocence or ignorance on one hand, and experience and knowledge on the other. And it is through the assumption of these contrasting aspects of the individual existence that a new dimension of being can be achieved.

An extensive use of contrasts represents an important dynamic element in all Romantic literary versions. Particular notions are suggested through the employment of their opposites, light intensifies the image of darkness (Erben's "darkly burning lamp") and sounds strengthen the silence (the motif of a midnight bell in the winter landscape of Zhukovsky's "Ludmila"). And, as in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, an encounter with a devil can lead to the recognition of God's power, and a passage through death may intensify the feeling of and a respect for life. (In a number of versions, the idea of rebirth is associated with the renewal of the heroine's contact with people; some ballads, moreover, illustrate the concept of transformation by concluding that she is unrecognised after her return home.) Accordingly, the physical aspects of the transformation, referred to by particular ballads (the motifs of an injury or illness, or Erben's symbolic motif of the ragged shirts), imply the spiritual meaning of the experience: a disturbing and a self-threatening transition towards a better understanding of one's position in the universe, including a deeper notion of the individual power and responsibility.

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