

THE INDIVIDUALISM OF THE POET-MUSICIAN

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An Ancient Tradition

Lyric poetry. The words may call to mind visions of weepy Victorian sweethearts reciting treachery words of love. But lyric poetry is an ancient art-form, much older -- and much more significant -- than turn-of-the-century romantic verses. In my view, it is the most intensely personal of all the forms of art.

When I speak of lyric poetry, I am referring to what might be better termed musical poetry, which first appeared in ancient Greece with Archilochus, Sappho, and Alkaios (poets who accompanied themselves on the lyre, thus the designation lyric poetry). At root, musical poetry or, more simply, song is the voice of the individual: the presentation, through a seamless integration of words and music, of the personal thoughts and feelings of an individual creator. Of course, all art consists to some extent in the concretization of an individual point of view or sense of life; however, I believe that the very art-form of song leads to a heightened expression of individuality, beyond that associated with art in general or with any other art-form. So we can deepen our understanding of art and bring to light an unexamined thread in the history of individualism by explicating the significance of the tradition of the lyric poet, the troubadour, the singer-songwriter, the poet-musician.

The Western tradition of lyric poetry began, as most all great Western traditions began, in ancient Greece. However, the expression of individual thoughts and feelings in lyric poetry was not an early practice of Greek civilization. The earliest poetry of Greece for which we have textual evidence was epic poetry, a genre that consisted of large-scale works which grew out of oral traditions and whose origins are lost in pre-history. Thus both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are at root and were originally oral poems (see Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*), which were passed down from bard to bard for centuries, being changed and improved by the better singers and eventually reaching their codified form with the bard we know as Homer (probably in the late ninth or early eighth century BC).

The heroic tradition of epic poetry was essentially communal, in that it preserved the special, defining stories of the Greeks -- the stories that made them Greeks as opposed to barbarians. By contrast, the tradition of lyric poetry was essentially individual. While Homer is unknown to us as a man because he sang the songs of the Greeks, the lyric poets are relatively familiar to us because they sang their own songs. (Hesiod holds a mediate position in this historical progression, since he presented not only the ancient myths but also his own interpretations of those myths, as well as stories that were purely his own; in this he laid some of the groundwork for the lyric poets who followed him.)

Greek Exemplars

The most famous of the Greek lyric poets were Archilochus, Sappho, and Alkaios, who created their work in the fifth century BC, during what I would call the first definitively individualistic period in Western history (see A.R. Burn, *The Lyric Age of Greece*). Let's look at some of the textual evidence for this individualism.

Whereas the epic poems celebrated valor, cunning, and other traditional heroic virtues, the lyric poet Archilochus, who is often considered to be the founder of genre, expressed quite different thoughts. In one of his most famous poems he shrugs off the fact that he left his shield under a bush when he ran from battle to save his life, a cowardly act of self-preservation that Homer never would have celebrated. While in some of his poems Archilochus showed that he could be as crude as any common soldier, in others he manifested a softer, introspective side. Always, however, he expresses his own thoughts and feelings, his own likes and dislikes, no matter if they went against convention:

I don't like a mighty general with long-straddling legs
Who exults in his curly hair and trim mustache.
Give me a short one whose legs are crooked,
Steady on his feat, a giant in his heart.

Alkaios, too, focuses on those things that he finds interesting or important for himself, in large part the political power-struggles and internecine strife in his city of Mytilene (whose turbulence led him to coin the phrase "the ship of state"). Here is a brief sample:

Soon the tyrant's lust for power shall destroy
The city: already the critical moment is here.

Sappho goes beyond Archilochus and Alkaios in the sensuality and sophistication of her verse, in her use of language, and in her celebration of love and personal experience. For example, in one of the surviving fragments of her poetry, she overturns the traditional, Homeric values by explicitly appraising love as more important than military pursuits:

Some say an army of horsemen or footmen or rowers
Is the most beautiful thing over the coal-black earth,
But I say it is that thing, whatever it is,
That one loves and desires.
....
Now my Anactoria too is gone, and
I would rather see her supple walk
And the bright sparkle of her face
Than all the chariots of Lydia
And foot-soldiers in arms.

I could quote many more lines, but even these few suffice to indicate the individualism that is manifest in the tradition of Greek lyric poetry. Indeed, the Christians feared the Greek poets' pagan celebration of sensuality and individual-

ity so strongly that they burned their writings, doing such a thorough job of it that, in the case of Sappho, we are left today with only one complete poem and fragments of less than one hundred poems (out of ten books of her poetry extant in ancient times).

As I have noted, the Greek lyric poets were not just poets, but poet-musicians who wrote and performed both the words and the music of their compositions (indeed, legend has it that Sappho invented the plectrum in order to improve her ability to perform). Sadly, the musical aspect of Greek lyric poetry has been lost, so we shall never know these poems as songs. However, the example and (some of) the words of the Greek lyric poets have survived.

Unfortunately, the magical union of words, music, and performance in ancient practice disintegrated not long after the time of Archilochus, Alkaios, and Sappho. For example, the great lyric poets of Rome, such as Horace and Catullus, were not lyric poets in the original Greek sense of the term, since they did not sing their compositions to the accompaniment of the lyre or any other instrument. These Romans were poets pure and simple, writing for a literary audience -- not poet-musicians, singing and playing their songs for listeners.

The Troubadours

The tradition of the poet-musician did not resurface again in the West until the fascinating time of the twelfth-century renaissance, in the form of the troubadours. The troubadour movement was strongest in what is now southern France (see Denis Stevens, *A History of Song*). Outstanding examples of the genre include works by William IX, Bernard de Born, Arnaut Daniel, Bernard de Ventadorn, and others. Even the great logician and philosopher Peter Abelard wrote secular songs in the style of the troubadours, though all that survives of his work now are some of his later, religious songs. This tradition was branded heretical and was decimated by the so-called Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229). However, the ideas of that culture survived, were spread to northern France by the Trouveres, to Germanic lands by the Minnesangers, to the Iberian peninsula by the vihuelistas, and became a foundational part of the European heritage.

Many intellectual and cultural phenomena of the twelfth-century renaissance presaged those of what we tend to think of as the "actual" renaissance. Indeed, it was Nietzsche's view that the troubadours were the very creators of modern European culture. Nietzsche was especially impressed by their invention of the concept of romantic love. He writes:

Artful and enthusiastic reverence and devotion are the regular symptoms of an aristocratic way of thinking and evaluating. This makes plain why love as passion -- which is our European specialty -- simply must be of noble origin: as is well known, its invention must be credited to the Provençal knight-poets, those magnificent and inventive human beings of the "gai saber" [gaya scienza] to whom Europe owes so many things and

almost owes itself. ("What is Noble" in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 260)

Nietzsche also speaks of "the Provençal concept of *gaya scienza* -- that unity of singer, knight, and free spirit that distinguishes the wonderful early culture of the Provençals from all equivocal cultures" (*Ecce Homo*). The qualities that Nietzsche most loved about this culture were the very characteristics that St. Bernard railed against in clerics of the age as leading to pride and the loss of a properly monastic frame of mind: curiosity, light-heartedness, joy, and high self-regard.

Another thinker impressed by the troubadours was Ayn Rand, who wrote: "The spiritual ancestor or symbol of the Romanticist is the medieval troubadour who roamed the countryside, inspiring men with visions of life's potential beyond the dreary boundaries of their daily toil" (*The Romantic Manifesto*, page 118). While the troubadours did not quite roam the countryside -- it was probably not safe to do



so in the twelfth century, and the troubadours lived and worked in the courts of cultured aristocrats, although they did move from court to court -- the point is clear: the poet-composer was a creator of rare vision and inspiration.

Though politics and other issues were presented in troubadour art (as they had been in Greek lyric poetry), the main topic was, of course, romantic love. The troubadours were really the first to celebrate romantic love in the modern West. If you are interested in exploring this music through recordings, be forewarned that modern performances vary widely in artistic quality (I own one recording that even celebrates the "avant-garde" nature of the troubadours' music!). The most passionate, intelligible, and meaningful recording I have found is Paul Hillier's *Troubadour Songs and Medieval Lyrics*, which is well worth searching out. Mr. Hillier has made a more recent recording entitled *Proensa*, which I can recommend provisionally, with the caveat that it does not quite live up to the high standard of his earlier work.

Modern Song

The tradition of song that developed in Romantic times, exemplified in works by composers such as Schumann, Schubert, and Wolff, is different from that of the troubadours in many respects. Most important, these song composers were not poet-musicians in the sense of which I speak, since they set to music the words of other writers. The same can be said of most of the popular American songwriters of the first half of the twentieth century, who tended to work in teams (the Gershwin brothers, Rogers and Hart, and various writers with composers such as Kern, Arlen, and Ellington). An exception here is Cole Porter,

who wrote both the words and the music of his songs, and who therefore stands above the other songwriters of the time in this regard (though he, too, tended to write genre songs for the musical theatre, not direct expressions of personal experience). Despite their often high level of art or craft, songwriters and composers who set the words of others to music cannot create the kind of unified presentation of personal experience that the poet-musicians do.

It is not until later in the twentieth century that we see again the resurgence of the poet-musician, in the work of folk-pop singer-songwriters in America and Britain starting in the early 1960s and continuing today.

The fountainhead of this genre is Bob Dylan, whose recording *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* paved the way for all who followed.

Throughout the 1960s, Dylan competed creatively with the individual songwriters of the Beatles, who raised the status of modern popular music from tunes for dancing to songs for listening (while the Beatles functioned musically as a group, most of their songs were written individually by Paul McCartney, John Lennon, or George Harrison). While Dylan and the Beatles concentrated mainly on the ancient lyric topics of love and politics, together they defined the genre and the almost messianic role of the modern singer-songwriter.

The singer-songwriter movement flowered especially in late 1960s and early 1970s, with fine work from established artists like Bob Dylan (*Blood on the Tracks*) and George Harrison (*All Things Must Pass*), from newcomers like Joni Mitchell (*Blue, Court and Spark*), James Taylor (*Sweet Baby James, Mud Slide Slim*), Carole King (*Tapestry*), Cat Stevens (*Tea for the Tillerman, Teaser and the Firecat*), and Jackson Browne (*Saturate Before Using, For Everyman*), as well as from a host of lesser-known songwriters such as Laura Nyro, Wendy Waldman, Karla Bonoff, Jon Pousette-Dart, Rickie Lee Jones, Rex Fowler, and many more. Furthermore, many of these artists produced recordings that did not just showcase individual songs, but presented meaningful progressions of thoughts, images, and feelings in the form of song cycles.

Despite exaggerated reports of the death of the singer-songwriter movement, it has continued with new recordings by established artists (e.g., Jackson Browne's *I'm Alive* and Bob Dylan's phoenix-like *Time Out of Mind*), as well as work from newcomers like Suzanne Vega, Lyle Lovett, David Wilcox, Shawn Colvin, Tori Amos, and Sarah McLachlan (who is quite individualistic in her outlook and who matches the intelligence of her lyrics with interesting, melodic music).

The Integrating Thread

While I would not dare claim that someone like Joni Mitchell or Bob Dylan is the artistic equal of Sappho, I do think there is a traceable aesthetic lineage running from the

lyric poets of ancient Greece through the twelfth-century troubadours to the singer-songwriters of our day. That common thread is the pursuit of personal understanding and expression through the performance of a song whose words and music are the creation of a single person.

It is this combination of words, music, and performance that makes the art of the troubadour the most individual and organically integrated of all the arts. And I believe there is an important connection between the individualism of the lyric poets and their chosen art-form of song. Language alone, even the patterned language of poetry, is inherently an intellectual, conceptual medium -- this is the basic power of the literary arts, but also their limitation. In my experience, no matter how concrete my descriptive images, when I write mere prose my language is an aesthetic means of presenting primarily my thoughts, my mind. By contrast, music is "a language of the emotions"; when I write instrumental music, I am able to present subtle feelings and moods of the most personal kind, but absent words that music has no precise reference to reality.

The marriage of words and music in song consistently presents thought and feeling as an integrated whole, something that other art-forms can accomplish only fleetingly. Further, the performance of song adds the element of sheer physical presence that we find also in live theatre and in spoken poetry -- in these arts, the performer's body and person are made to function as an artistic medium. Thus when the troubadour performs his songs, he brings his own thoughts and feelings to aesthetic life through the medium of his own person -- mind, body, and soul combined in an organically unified presentation of the creator's individual experience. In my experience as a singer-songwriter, it is this supreme integration of aesthetic elements, mirroring the integration of essential aspects of the individual person, that makes song so intensely personal an art-form.

I once tried to express this integration in a poem entitled "Troubadour":

I write no wondrous stories
Of mankind's vast potential;
I sculpt no human glories
Of what I deem essential.

Mine's a smaller, subtler art
Made of separate arts combined:
Music lets me voice my heart,
Poems let me sing my mind,

But a song's the wedded bliss
Of consummated pleasure
Where my soul and mind can kiss
In free melodic measure.

But I've never set that poem to music, let alone performed it, so I've always found its expression to be somewhat lacking...

