

‘Do you remember, Lord Gregory?’: The Agency of Memory in Scottish Ballads¹

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the agency of memory and remembering, mental mechanisms that serve diverse functions within the ballad tradition, and which allow characters, and us as listeners, to shade experience from the past into the present, bridging time, and distance, and leading us to rehearse the future, as Bill Nicolaisen puts it. The Child ballads begin famously and characteristically, *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, with a great deal of backstory unknown, or, perhaps, assumed. I have shown how, in some cases, the backstory is provided by communal cultural knowledge or by explicit narration before the song is sung and during its performance (McKean 2015), but through the device of recall, the backstory can sometimes make an appearance within the body of the song, forming a complex concatenated structure that unfolds in performance and upon apprehension by a listener into a multivalent constellation of action and meaning. I will explore remembered action, recalled relationships, and retained loyalties in relation to the unfolding of the ballad story and its narrative repercussions, looking at how memory serves as a fulcrum, a catalyst, and a narrative device.

KEYWORDS:

memory, remembering, Child ballads, Scottish ballads, Scotland

Memory is a place. A place we can get to with a trick of the mind. When remembering, we can sense ourselves in a physical space, sometimes complete with proprioceptive sensations, smells, and sounds, as well as the emotions, that accompanied us in the frame of that particular, original moment. Thus, memory is not simply *temporal* slippage from the present to the past, but can be a kind of *physical* journey, a reliving of time-space-place. Memories and rememberings of this kind are mental mechanisms that serve diverse functions within the ballad tradition, allowing characters in the songs, and us as singers or listeners, to shade experience from the past into the present, bridging time and distance in a trice, or in a stanza at any rate.

W. F. H. Nicolaisen writes about how the past is used to frame the present and shape the future: ‘Once narrated, the past [...] becomes part of an experience which at least partially enables us to face and cope with what is coming to us [...] an existential ingredient in our strategies for survival’ (1984). So, the act of remembering, through narrative singing as it is realized in the ballads (see Shields 2008), gives ballad characters, singers, and listeners an opportunity to revisit the past, its impact upon them, and to repurpose that *relived* experience to shape future action.

The Child ballads begin, famously and characteristically, *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, with a great deal of backstory unknown, or, perhaps,

1 My grateful thanks to Eilidh Whiteford for her perceptive comments on a draft of this essay.



assumed.² They are also generally considered to unfold linearly, with episodes in sequential order, drawn inexorably forward by structure, tune, and time. But through the act of remembering, complicated features of backstory can appear within the ballad present, reminding characters of promises made, kept and, more usually, in Scottish ballads at any rate, broken.

The singer and listener are deeply implicated, too, for the characters are surrogates given agency by their composers, re-creators, and audiences in performance. As characters revisit the past, reflect upon its impact, and use it to shape their future action within the arc of the song, singers and listeners re-creating these traditional songs in the present moment of performance are also agents to the intra-song process of remembering.

These memory episodes, as I will call them, do not really take the characters or listeners back into a different time, as a flashback in a film explicitly does, but rather brings the past into the present, making real in the ballad present the events of which they speak. Characters are able to loop into past experience, past time, and return again.

It is worth noting the inexorable flow of time as a song is performed. Both singer and listener move through the song, with story, incident, and character in constant flux as verses come and go, receding into recent, impressionistic memory. Memory episodes, then, form complex structures that seem to unfold diachronically in a multi-dimensional synthesis of action and meaning, but are actually held in the cradle of a synchronic moment. These occurrences are thus more than a narrative voice taking time out to review the past. Rather, when someone recalls past events, for a purpose, they intermingle timeframes, so that past and present exist together in the moment of singing.

Whether in song, or in daily life, can such appeals to memory help us break free of the bonds of past and present? Do they allow the ballad characters, singers, and listeners to use the past in constructive ways? Can they enable imagination (the future) and experience (the past) to meet?

Before getting more deeply involved, it is important to mention that memory is meaningless without its corollary phenomenon, forgetting. One does not exist without the other and it is hard to imagine a dramatic story unfolding without the complementary potentials created by the tension between these two strands. Child goes so far as to suggest that, 'The feature of a man being made, by magical or other means, to forget a first love who had done and suffered much for him, and being suddenly restored to consciousness and his original predilection, is of the commonest occurrence in traditional tales' ('Young Beichan', Child 40, headnote). Naturally, for Child, it is a man who falls victim to this trope, though the ballad tradition does have its share of forgetful women.

Sometimes forgetting is invoked as a positive, as Child writes in the headnote to 'Lord Maxwell's Last Goodnight', reporting that two chiefs 'entered into a bond to forget and forgive all rancour and malice of the past, and to live in amity, themselves

2 For an exploration of contextualizing narratives within the Scottish ballad tradition, see McKean 2015.



and their friends, in all time coming' (*italics mine*). The peace did not last, however, as memory reasserts itself: 'A little more than a year after, a party of Johnstones, relying, no doubt, on the forbearance of their new ally, then warden of the West Marches, "rode a stealing"' ('Lord Maxwell's Last Goodnight', Child 195, headnote).

It would be fair to consider forgetting — loss of memory — to be an essential 'complicating action' in Proppian terms (1968) — promises forgotten, commitments overlooked, agreements abandoned — elements without which a story simply could not exist, or at least not with any modicum of dramatic appeal. Take, for example, the characters in 'Little Musgrave' (Child 81), all of whom forget the expectations placed on them by their assigned social roles. Lady Barnard forgets her loyal promise of marriage; Musgrave abandons his duty; and Lord Barnard may be thought to follow through on a deserved honour killing, or be thought to have neglected his husbandly duties, leading his lady to stray (though one suspects that the bar for a husband's behaviour was probably quite low in those feudal times). Only the little footpage remembers his duty and, in most people's assessment of the song in my experience, suffers for it greatly, being labelled a clype, a traitor. So, remembering is an important skill and its opposite a potential cause of much suffering.

Very often, a memory episode can function as a fulcrum at the centre of the song, one that precipitates the next scene, driving the linear narrative forward and thereby shaping the ensuing outcome.

- 17 Do you no remember the caul mirky nicht
 When ye were in the yowe-buchts wi me?
 ('The Broom of the Cowdenknowes', Child 217, Appendix, *italics mine*)

Such a phrase clearly indicates a divergence of memory, potential incompatibilities of experience. By questioning the accepted narrative of what happened, the stage is set for a dialogue, for some conflict and, ultimately, a resolution. This memory episode introduces contesting versions of reality that trigger the plot and our draw our interest to it. The whole denouement of the song, then, relies on this problematization of the narrative arc. What *did* happen? Who remembers what? How will we reconcile differing experiences of the 'same' event?

Principally, then, we might consider memory episodes to be *triggers to action*, as they can sometimes keep the plot moving, or even get it going in the first place, as in 'The Elfin Knight', when the main character says,

- 1 *Remember* me to one who lives there;
 For once she was a true-love of mine.
 ('The Elfin Knight', Child 2, Corrections, *italics mine*)

This couplet sets in train the question-and-answer structure so characteristic of this song, and a number of other Child ballads, most famously 'Lord Randall' (Child 12), but it also sets the scene on the broken relationship that lies at its heart. Remind my former lover of my existence, says the protagonist, stimulating not just memory, but resurrecting an entangled, mysterious, and half-remembered past that is only ever



hinted at in the text, a rich feature of which we will see more later.

Sometimes, the memory episode plays a more active role, forming a part of the narrative itself, rather than simply triggering it. Here we see the role played by *forgetting*, which is, for all intents and purposes, an *absence* of memory.

29 He took sic pleasure in deer and roe,
Till he *forgot* his gay ladye.

30 Till by it came that milk-white hynde,
And then he *mind* on his ladye syne.

So, the protagonist forgets the *one thing* that he is supposed to remember and pays a very dear price for it, remembering too late.

31 He hasted him to yon greenwood tree,
For to relieve his gay ladye;

32 But found his ladye lying dead,
Likeways her young son at her head.
(‘Leesome Brand’, Child 16A, italics mine)

An even more embedded and protracted memory episode is found in so-called Broken Token songs, in which a couple break a coin or a ring into two pieces to remind them of each other and their promise to each other, and to provide a means of certain identification when they meet years later and rejoin the Sundered object. The memory episode can be extended pretty much through the entire song, forming a connecting thread that binds the couple (and the listener) together through memory, shared experience, and an object.

At times, memory is wielded as a weapon, as in Young Ronald (Child 304), when the thief counters Ronald’s bold, threatening statement,

47 ‘O here am I,’ said young Ronald,
‘Will take the deed in hand ;
And ye’ll gie me your daughter dear,
I’ll seek nane o your land.’

The Lord refuses to give in, and counters with a powerful reminder, a taunt, really, of Ronald’s past with his dead lover, with this mere mention, dredging up painful memories designed to denature Ronald’s initial threat.

48 ‘I woudna for my life, Ronald,
This day I left you here;
Remember ye yon lady gay
For you shed mony a tear.’

The ploy backfires, however, and Ronald's appetite for violence is redoubled, his grief and passionate sorrow redirected into fury and rage, his inhibitions gone,

49 Fan he did *mind* on that lady
 That he left him behind,
 He hadna mair fear to fight
 Nor a lion frae a chain. (Young Ronald, Child 304)

Here memory is deployed as a coercive tool to bring about a desired outcome, only for it to have the complete opposite effect, exacerbating the situation exponentially. Memory must be thought of as ambiguous, or, at any rate, many sided, so subjective is it. A single situation can be experienced and remembered in very different ways; weaponizing it may well have unforeseen and unintended consequences.

Let us return now to 'Lord Gregory', 'The Lass of Roch Royal', or 'The Lass of Aughrim' (Child 76), whose use of memory episodes, prompts, and effects is second to none, to start with, looking at how a memory episode creates *simultaneous* alternatives, quantum ballad realities.

Dae ye remember, Lord Gregory, that night in Caperquin
 When we exchanged pocket handkerchiefs and that against my will?
 Yours wis fine linen, fyles mine wis coarse cloth
 Yours cost one guinea, love, an mine bit a groat.³

Here, the incremental repetition sequence, with escalating significance and import, forms the crux of the song, the essential fulcrum leading to the denouement: the undoing of the young woman.

Annie speaks of their tryst in Caperquin when they exchanged tokens of their love (however metaphorical those tokens might be). Thus, their *present moment dialogue* exists in the *same moment* as the *relived* past exists in their minds.

Leave noo these windaes an likewise this ha
 Fer it's deep in the sea ye should find yer doonfa.

responds 'Gregory' from within. The characters are present and in dialogue, albeit on opposite sides of a door physically. But there is an added, complicating dimension, a twisting of realities, again a kind of quantum state, in which two very different conversations are happening at the same time. In our first imaginings, Annie is having a simple dialogue with *Lord Gregory* inside the castle, but in fact, on the other side of the door stands *Gregory's mother*, dissembling, pretending to be him in order to force Annie away, to save her son from marrying below his station. Thus, the two very differently weighted conversations, occupying the same space — Annie-Lord Gregory

3 This and subsequent quotes from 'The Lass of Roch Royal' are my own version of the song unless noted otherwise. My version is based on that of the great Fermanagh singer, Cathal McConnell from whom I learned it in the 1990s.



and Annie-mother — are simultaneous and concurrent, and *three* characters, albeit one physically absent, create two dialogues. In a subversive way, this scene breaks Axel Olrik's 'Law of Two to a Scene' (1965) for there are, for all intents and purposes, three characters playing the scene, although for the audience there are only two.

The incremental repetition sequence is given more space in some versions of the song, such as Child 76A, which emphasizes the idea of memory as a kind of Shibboleth, a verbal test of identity, but one subverted by power dynamics associated with the socio-economic imbalance between Annie and Gregory's mother, who tries deliberately to undermine Annie's confidence with this dissembling set up question:

- 11 'If you be the lass of the Rochroyall,
As I trow not you be,
You will tell me some of our love-tokens,
That was betwixt you and me.'

What follows is a sequence of incremental repetitions in which Annie bids the supposed Gregory to remember what they have shared,

- 12 'Have you not mind, Love Gregory,
Since we sat at the wine;
When we changed the rings off our fingers,
And ay the worst fell mine?' ('The Lass of Roch Royal', Child 76A)

A comparison of the rings and pieces of clothing they exchanged follows in some versions (Child 76G, vv. 13–16), with Gregory's mother undermining the value of each token, and by extension, Annie herself along with her claim to Gregory's affections.

In an intriguing and artful way, while ostensibly about identity and truth, this repetition is really about dissembling, disloyalty, and spite, for the person in dialogue with Annie is not, as she supposes, Lord Gregory himself, but rather his mother who is simply trying to drive her away. The mother's spite and malice come through clearly in her responses to Annie's remembered moments of her and Gregory's time together, moments in which she's keenly aware of the social distance between them. For her, the love between them overcomes this gulf. Perhaps for Gregory, too, but his mother, dissembling through the unopened door, emphasises their social disparity by creating and averring a counter memory to each of Annie's propositions. Two different versions of a single meeting, one remembered, the other created, two co-existing realities in effect, confront each other through the closed door. Unsurprisingly, the latter, though wholly false, wins the day, backed as it is by social power and status, a valuable lesson about the relative power and mutable certainty of 'truth', situated as it is in the hegemonic context of societal norms and structures. Annie learns, to her regret, that all the experiential truth in the world is no match for established orthodoxies and she pays dearly for it.

So, the single past that these characters share is realised in a deliberately bifurcated reality. Annie is the rejected woman, in desperation for the safety of her baby and herself, while Gregory's mother is driven by possessive jealousy and unbridled



hatred for a woman she considers of far too low a social standing for her son. As far as Annie is concerned, she is *re*-living, *re*-membering, while the mother is living and creating a *new* reality, one without anchor in experience, an oppositional mechanism that gives the scene immense poignancy and power, a very simple means to a complicated end which allows two realities to exist at once, fashioned by memory, remembering, and narration. Annie lives her reality with the hope of a possible positive outcome, while the mother, holding the power of tragedy in her duplicitous voice embodies an inexorable complicating action which in turn leads to inevitable disaster. And as with all great tragedies, the singer and the listeners are privy to both worlds and thus can see and feel the preventable, yet inevitable disaster unfold from this fulcrum moment.

Of course, Gregory's mother knows exactly what she is doing and sings her desired outcome into reality in a predictive, almost spell-like fashion, repeating her response and calling on social mores to adjure Annie to 'do the right thing' and drown herself: 'It's deep in the sea ye should find yer doonfa'. And in that phrase, we find a kind of reverse memory, a predictive rehearsal of the mother's desired future that W. F. H. Nicolaisen suggests is one way that we cope with things that are to come and also how we make *things we wish for* happen — rehearsing the future, he calls it — much like psychologists encourage sports people to visualise success, the achievement of their goals.

It is often said that the action in the Child ballads unfolds in a *linear* way, indeed this is sometimes noted as one of their key characteristics. But with the use of memory episodes, the characters, while not themselves moving back through time, quickly avail themselves of the now, the present, and the past and often another physical space, or place. Thus, the ballad is not really a linear form, but rather an internally poly-chronic one that knits and purls through time, reaching back, striving forward, all through navigating, remembering, and inflecting the action of the present moment. In acting out in the now, within the lived timeframe of a live song performance, the characters need all the tools they can get; memory is one of them, used to reflect, rebuke, remind, alter another's course of action, or encourage consideration before a (possibly hasty) decision is made.

For another look at how memory episodes create *alternate realities* within the world of a song, it is useful to look at 'Barbara Allan' (Child 84), common though it is. Most versions of the song tell a quite mysterious story, actually, for a song so widespread and well-known: Barbara Allan goes to see her dying lover and when told that a single kiss would cure him, turns away, spurning him and leaving him to die. Clearly a hard-hearted and cruel woman. But, this is an instance where a different version of the same song illuminates a mystery that ultimately explains her behaviour, completely changing our perspective, as a stanza from Stanley Robertson shows:

Bit I *remember* lang ago,
 A-drinkin in the tavern
 When ye an aa yer couthy friends
 When ye slighted Barbara Allan.
 (Robertson, 'Barbara Allan', Child 84)



Sometime before, John had refused to acknowledge Barbara in public, perhaps being of a different social class, or at least not considered suitable in some way, whether by John himself, or by his friends.

Barbara and John have been on two very different *trajectories of memory* since the incident in the tavern, a bifurcation that facilitates, or even necessitates, the denouement. For John, it was a casual night out with his friends, the camaraderie was good, drink was drunk, and probably, to use a Glasgow expression, they had such a good time that they ‘cannae mind a thing’.

For Barbara, the key feature, in her memory, one completely absent from his, is the lack of acknowledgement from John. We never know why this dichotomy exists, whether it is simply that he was wrapped up with his pals, having a good time, or whether there is a social subtext whereby he did not feel comfortable acknowledging her in a public setting. Whatever the case, her experience of the evening incident differs completely from his. In fact, for him, it is remembered as a simple night of fun without incident, while for her it is a confrontation, a moment that *became* a memory, laid down in the brain because something *significant* happened to her, something that causes her immense pain and sets her on course for the ballad’s crucial feature: the inexorable path to denial.

In this case, memory plays some tricks on us *and* the characters. With these two opposed narrated realities to hand, we see two things. First, in her recollection of the event, clearly different from his, we get an explanation of Barbara’s behaviour in the run up to the bedside encounter. We see why she heard the bells ringing and did not go to his bedside, filled with hurt, and possibly resentment, as she is. Second, it is clear from the *remembered* and recounted episode that a showdown is coming. In some versions, it is unclear whether they really even had a relationship, or whether it was mutual admiration that was cut off (for her) by his behaviour in the tavern and consummated mentally (by him) as he developed un-acted-upon feelings for her.

In any case, their different, possibly equally valid, *remembered ‘realities’* lead to dire consequences, the death of both of them. Thus, memory and its intrusion into the song two-thirds of the way through has some pretty serious consequences. Clearly, *what* we remember, *how* we remember it, *how long* we remember, and *to whom we tell it* can all have serious implications for our lives, and, indeed, our deaths. After John’s death, Barbara regrets that he has passed, maybe not her decision, but his death, at any rate. In versions of the song without the tavern incident memory verses, Child 84B, for example, the listener is left with a much less sympathetic impression of Barbara — ‘hard-hearted Barbara Allan’, as she is styled. (Naturally, a singer’s or listener’s personal experience of romantic love, loyalty, and disloyalty, can strongly colour these reactions, as well.)

So, the memory episode verses in this song soften our judgement of Barbara, though we can still see that she is tough as nails, sticking to her principles whatever the cost. We can argue about whether that cost is too great, for John or Barbara, for both, or indeed ourselves as listeners, but her conviction is above reproach. But there is more to it than simply strength of conviction. We can see Barbara as a woman scorned, may be, but also a woman *hurt*. In this way, the mechanism of memory,

through offering us a window into the past — another place, another time — changes not just our sense of what actually happened in the tavern that night, but our very perceptions of right and wrong in a fundamental way.

A similar impact on the ‘facts’ that we take away from a song can be seen in ‘Lord Barnard and Little Musgrave’ (Child 81), noted above, in which the characters of Lady Barnard, Little Musgrave, and Lord Barnard could each be taken as doing the right thing, or, conversely, abnegating their responsibilities to their social class, depending on where one is in the song and whose perspective — and associated behavioural norms — is foregrounded. Thus, memory trains and shapes our sense of right and wrong in the present and builds worlds in which we make contingent decisions in and for the now.

In the ballads, memory’s role is largely to stimulate a reaction in the present moment. Characters quote the past not to reminisce and share of past experience, but rather to spur on the action, or another character, or to contribute something to the structure, such as a Proppian Complicating Action or Resolution, in the *ballad present*, the moment in time in which the stanza is being sung. Thus, in these cases, the ballad future is created out of the past, as Nicolaisen suggests is the case with narrative. Plot movement is heavily dependent on this agency, this generative power.

The mechanism of memory allows us, and the ballad characters, to *use* the past in significant ways, creating a *metanarrative* in which the past *becomes* present and is reused in the here and now, changing the course of our present as we create the future that we will experience and that we *wish to try and shape*.

Even for the song collector, outside the bounds of the song itself, memory plays an important role. The singer must remember; the collector urges them to do so. The very existence of the song in the written or audio record hinges on memory. Memory for the scholar, the singer, and for the ballad character, then, is not about past action but about the now, providing a chance for reflection, while also providing the audience with a backstory and an explanation of motivation for the characters in the complex, layered *ballad present*.

There is an interesting corollary function of memory and remembering in the world of the singer and listener, as performance is a linear, time-driven exercise. We hear the plot being set out in real time, whose unstoppable passage reigns. We remember what we can and our interpretation is based on the particular aspects of plot that we *remember* well enough to dwell upon. Memory episodes free us, as listeners, and composer/singers of traditional songs, from the straitjacket of linearity, with introduction and conclusions emanating from the central core of an *episode*, all that precedes and follows orbiting that hub, a fulcrum for past and present concatenated. So, really there is no present, only a past and a future. In this no man’s land of existence, anything can happen, and ideas can achieve the freedom they need to allow us to reach our full potential, as we create the future out of the past (Glassie 1995, 395). This function is, I believe, key to why ballads retain their appeal even today: complexities, ambiguities, and layers of meaning that can be long debated.





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