"Fatal Flower Garden": The Execution of a Child Ballad[1] Robin Purves

What can we hear when we listen with care to the second song on the first album, "Ballads," in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*? An instant of reproduced hiss and crackle, from a worn needle dragged through the dust on neglected shellac, loud enough to compete with the music when it starts a split second later: a Hawaiian guitar, at a stately or tentative pace, as if the player is feeling his way through the tune for the first time, picks out the melodic line that will accompany the vocal performance, backed by a simple two-beat strum on an acoustic guitar. The Hawaiian overture drops out before the voices start, as if the player can't play and sing at the same time:

*It rained, it poured, it rained so hard,*

*It rained so hard all day,*

*That all the boys in our school*

*Came out to toss and play.*

*They tossed their ball again so high,*

*Then again so low,*

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[1] This essay is dedicated to the memory of Jamie Burgess (1965 - 2014). I also wish to express my gratitude to And Rosta, Peter Manson and Stephen Thomson, who provided some very perceptive comments on an early draft which helped me to revise and improve it.

*They tossed it into a flower garden*

*Where no one was allowed to go.*

There is nothing intrinsically impressive about the musical presentation of "Fatal Flower Garden," as it is executed by Nelstone's Hawaiians, a duo from southern Alabama who recorded it in Atlanta, Georgia on 30 November, 1929. There may not be much to say about the vocal operations either: this is not a consummate rendition that should provoke hyperbole.

Who knows for sure why Hubert Nelson and James D. Touchstone took up the Hawaiian or steel guitar, and the exotic associations of its archipelagic origins? The instrument is said to have been introduced to American popular culture by Joseph Kekuku very early in the new century, and it was promoted and encountered as part of the culture and commerce of the Republic's most recently adopted state. Alabama is a long way from Hawaii, geographically and culturally, and the group may simply have been trying to cash in on a national craze for Hawaiian guitar and hula dancing. They do not attempt to exploit the instrument's idiosyncratic properties in the way that other artists will do; on the handful of other recordings Nelstone's Hawaiians made, it's a decorative frill on some utterly unremarkable country tunes. Martin Clayton, following Mantle Hood, suggests that "the motivation for slide playing seems to have been…a desire to better imitate vocal nuances," and it's true that the slide playing here does sound to the contemporary ear more like singing than the singing does, but just as the vocals mostly forego anything that could confidently be identified as subtle detailing and variation in the rendering of the ballad, so too the instrumentation doesn't strive after mimesis of the emotional ambience or 'comment' on the events described in the lyrics, as the 'bottleneck' style of playing often does in blues performances; no attempt is

made to effect the lachrymose twang familiar from country music.[2] If anything, the Hawaiian guitar on the track sounds just *pretty*, and cheerful, in a way that can't help but strike the listener as inappropriate given the story that the song commemorates.

If it is Hubert Nelson who sings "Fatal Flower Garden" and Touchstone who provides the harmonies, Nelson sounds a good deal older than his partner, which is not to say that he is the older man. Many singers of the period did sound much older than they were; many singers of the period *were* much older than they were. But Nelson sounds *old* in 1929, and sounds like he is missing some teeth. Singing a third person plural ("They tossed it into a flower garden") that conceals his presence in the crowd ("That all the boys in our school / Came out to toss and play"), the tale could be an anecdote from Nelson's own, ancient childhood, and his unusual or obstructed pronunciation of the occasional word ("She *fuysht* showed him…" and 'diamond' pronounced "die-*muhd*") also works to distance Nelson from his singing partner by promoting a sense of Nelson's ownership of the narrative. Touchstone's concentration on the impossible task of harmonising with Nelson's fairly neutral or conversational tone has the largely unintended effect of making his delivery appear to convey feeling behind Nelson's apparent mindlessness, but the discernible time-lag between the singers, caused by a relative shortness of breath in Nelson as well as the imperfect execution of the harmonies, means Touchstone, as he lingers on notes Nelson blithely skips, sounds throughout like he's being drawn reluctantly on into the song, hypnotised but full of dread at what is coming. Where Nelson does inject some articulation into a line, as in his fastidious remonstrance, "Take these finger-rings off of *my fingers*," the equable phrasing is so ill-suited to the situation being described as to suggest he has no idea what he is in fact saying.

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[2] Martin Clayton, "Rock to Raga: The Many Lives of the Indian Guitar," in *Guitar Cultures* eds. Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe, 179-208 (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 186.

(With this particular line, as it continues into the next one, "Smoke them with your breath," how *could* he know what he is saying? The essay will return to this question later.)

The song's narrative could be considered a confusing one, in many respects. Despite the persistent and torrential rain, schoolboys play a ball game until, through mischief or by accident, the ball ends up in a garden "[w]here no one was allowed to go." This way of putting it does not indicate whether the prohibition was decreed by the proprietors of the garden, or if it is a parental or pedagogical interdict warning the children off. The gypsy lady's sudden appearance, once it is clear that the ball will have to be retrieved, is ominous for a number of reasons: she insists on one little boy being admitted to the garden, rather than simply returning the ball to the children herself, and her dress, while initially impressive, is a mixture of colours, yellow and green, which have symbolic meanings to do with being unripe, youthful, but also connotations, which go right back to the beginning of the English language, concerning a sickly or diseased complexion. Her own obvious pleasure in the winsome and diminutive boy she singles out from the rest introduces a more specific threat which seems to be answered with a counter-threat from the boy himself. His defiance, followed by the expression of his intent to involve a vengeful father-figure, may make the need to entice the boy more urgent, or, on the other hand, it may have no effect on the lady at all; it may not be possible to sway her from her determined course:

*"I won't come in, I shan't come in,*

*Without my playmates all;*

*I'll go t'my father 'n tell him about it –*

*That'll cause tears to fall."*

*She first showed him an apple seed,*

*Then again gold rings;*

*Then she showed him a diamond,*

*That enticed him in.*

Why think the boy might be convinced to go where he has been expressly forbidden, by something as tiny and unremarkable as an apple seed? Some other, similar versions of the song have instead "apple so red" and it seems likely that "apple seed" is a conserved mishearing of that phrase. The fact that he is persuaded by a precious jewel may hint at an original stain of corruption in the child, but then again he might be as tempted by the beauty of the object, by its clarity and reflective properties, as he is by its monetary value, because a number of gold rings might seem to a child more obviously valuable than a single diamond. Once he is ensnared, the music offers a discreet instrumental break which sees the brief return of the Hawaiian guitar, but the instrumental passage is not matched by an ellipsis in the narrative. We are told, after this break, that

*She took him by the lily-white hand,*

*She led him through the hall,*

*She put him into an upper room,*

*Where no one could hear him call.*

It is only after this stanza that there is a significant gap. He is secreted in a remote, upstairs room: then what happens? In the song, we go straight to the victim's monologue, which provides an ending of sorts:

*"Oh take these finger-rings off of my fingers,*

*Smoke them with your breath;*

*If any of my friends should call for me,*

*Tell them that I'm at rest."*

*"Bury the Bible at my head,*

*The Testament at my feet;*

*If my dear mother should call for me,*

*Tell her that I'm asleep."*

*"Bury the Bible at my feet,*

*The Testament at my head;*

*If my dear father should call for me,*

*Tell him that I am dead."*

Harry Smith's own notes accompanying each song on the *Anthology* translate "Fatal Flower Garden" into the following lurid splash: "GAUDY WOMAN LURES CHILD FROM PLAYFELLOWS; STABS HIM AS VICTIM DICTATES MESSAGE TO PARENTS."[3] They go on to provide a genealogy for the song which leads us into some unexpected areas.

> In its earliest versions the subject of this ballad is ritual murder; see Child (no.155) "Sir Hugh". Of Child's 18 versions, "G" (from Philadelphia) and "K" (Shropshire) are most like the present recording. The events described in the ballad can be found in *The Annals of Waverley* under the year 1255. For another British version see Sharp's Folk Songs of Somerset (no.68).[4]

Contra Smith, we might first note that nowhere in the *Anthology*'s version of the ballad is it mentioned that the "CHILD" is *stabbed* by a "GAUDY WOMAN." We are told that he is secreted in the upper room, then an abrupt switch occurs and the three remaining verses are delivered from the child's point-of-view. At first he seems to be directly addressing the woman who has taken and concealed him, but the scope of the address surely petitions a more general potential audience comprised of any Christian person who could conceivably find his body.

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[3] Harry Smith, *Handbook to Anthology of American Folk Music*, 2nd ed., (Washington, D.C.: Folkways, 1962), n.p.

[4] Ibid., n.p.

The news that the child is stabbed is brought in by Smith from his other sources. Version "G" of "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter" in Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* explicitly states that

*She took him by the lily-white hand,*

*And led him into the hall,*

*And laid him on a dresser-board,*

*And that was the worst of all.*

*She laid the Bible at his head,*

*The Prayer-Book at his feet,*

*And with a penknife small*

*She stuck him like a sheep.*[5]

"Fatal Flower Garden" sounds like a nursery rhyme compared with the many unaccompanied and more 'authentic' recordings of the older textual variants. It is decidedly shorter and less bloody than other versions and yet somehow more chilling and more memorable. Behind the approach that I am taking to this performance there lies an intuition that the deletions and accretions which inform and deform it have not been final or decisive; when we listen to this

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[5] Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vol.3, Part 1. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 248.

song, we are listening also, somehow, to what we are not hearing. How then should we proceed to talk about it? The next part of the analysis of "Fatal Flower Garden" will explain how the effects of some of the most strange and telling features of the song might be attributed to a concatenation of factors including the formal characteristics of the folk ballad and the historical events at the origin of the song's existence. The essay will then conclude with a speculative attempt to isolate certain factors in the oral transmission of the song which differentiate this performance from all other existing variants.

**A Child Who Would Not Die**

With regard to the repetition, in a different order, of the same lines in the last two verses ("Bury the Bible at my head, / The Testament at my feet;" succeeded by "Bury the Bible at my feet, / The Testament at my head;"), it would be wrong to diagnose the speaker as having changed his mind in the interim; it would be inappropriate to respond in the following way: "What if I simply bury both a Bible and a Testament at your head *and* your feet? And couldn't you just have said that in the first place?" What exactly is a "Testament" in a context where it has to be distinguished from a Bible? Is it some kind of confirmation of the child's identity, and evidence of the authenticity of his murder? What rotates between these stanzas are not the warrants he wishes to be interred with him, and not the child's position as he lies (he will not, we hope, be turning in his grave). It is the *rhymes* which alternate in a structure like this one, as a consequence of the same set of conventions which make gaps in the configuration of a ballad's narrative very common. Each version of any ballad exists as a combination of fairly autonomous units operating in a metonymic relation to each other and to all of the units that could have been used too (or instead); the rhymes rotate in a space beyond the pull of a longing from any identifiable subject, such as the implied speaker or the

singer of the song. The lack of overt psychological motivation (why does the gypsy lady want to kill the child? Why, after all the warnings, does he let himself be enticed inside the walls of her garden?) facilitates this ongoing recombination of relatively free-standing motifs. In this way, the Jew's daughter, who stands behind the gypsy lady along with the whole history of the persecution of Jewish communities in medieval England, can be replaced by a more conveniently irrelevant or apparently harmless target for prejudicial feeling. Less than fifteen years after the recording was made, of course, the unhappy logic of the substitution of gypsies for Jews, as kindred spirits in terms of their errancy and their falsified reputation as thieves and murderers of Christian children, will have been confirmed and consummated by the Nazis in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This notorious 'blood libel' against Jews had found purchase in England in the 12th-century, after the mysterious death of a young boy, known since as William of Norwich, was imputed to the local Jewish community. By the time of the death of the boy commemorated in "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter" (cited as an ur-text for "Fatal Flower Garden" by Harry Smith), there were already four shrines in England to alleged victims of 'Jewish ritual murder,' but the events around the death of Hugh of Lincoln are uniquely important and tragic and influential, according to the best historical account, Gavin I. Langmuir's forensic analysis of the available evidence, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln," in his book, *Towards a Definition of Anti-Semitism*.

Building on the work of a Jewish historian called Joseph Jacobs published in the late 19th-century, Langmuir offers a persuasive reading of the events consequent on the disappearance of a child called Hugh in the town of Lincoln on 31 July, 1255. How little Hugh actually met his end cannot be known for certain, though Jacobs speculates that the eight year old boy "accidentally fell into a cesspool attached to a Jew's house" where the corpse "putrefied for some twenty-six days and rose to the surface to dismay Jews who had assembled from all

over England to celebrate a marriage in an important family."[6] The body is subsequently dropped down a well in a less incriminating location, only for it to be discovered on 29 August and transported to Lincoln cathedral where a shrine is built to the young martyr.

Langmuir's scrupulous report demonstrates that the notoriety of the case is most likely due to the dire and inadvertent interaction of a number of contingent factors, including the involvement of the king. Henry III and his knight, John of Lexinton, who has strong links with the locality, pass through Lincoln on the way back from a visit to Scotland on 4 October, five weeks or so after the discovery of Hugh's body. John of Lexinton's brother happens to be the Dean of Lincoln cathedral, the venue which is now host to the child's corpse. Acting on rumours, the knight interrogates a Jew called Copin, who 'confesses' to involvement in the murder after being promised personal immunity from prosecution. The suggestibility of the king and the desire of the Lexintons to have a lucrative shrine to a child martyr on their premises are said to be the main causes for what happens next: the details of Copin's confession so horrify the king that, despite the immunity Copin was promised, he is immediately executed, and ninety one Jews in the vicinity are imprisoned. Eighteen of this group will be summarily hung six weeks later for refusing to go to trial before an all-Christian jury. The others are eventually released after intervention by a monastic order and by the king's own brother, who happens to own the 'rights' to the Jewish community in England. They are, at the time, subject to punitive taxation based solely on their ethnic identity and religious affiliation.

So Langmuir argues that it is Henry III's royal seal of approval for the charge of ritual murder which ought to be considered the most important determinant for the persistence and

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[6] Gavin I. Langmuir, *Towards a Definition of Anti-Semitism* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1990), 461.

influence of the story, as it is translated across many different kinds of discourse. It is not the story Langmuir extracts which informs "Fatal Flower Garden," however. Our song emerges from the hate-filled hearsay of a range of contemporaneous or later documents which invent endless, baseless and horrific embellishments to the death of Hugh. The *Annals of Burton*, for example, claim that the child was seized by a Jew called Jopin, to be concealed in the Jewish quarter of Lincoln and starved for twenty six days while Jews were summoned from all over England. The drawn-out execution involved the removal of the little boy's nose and upper lip with a knife, with the intention perhaps of giving his face a snout-like appearance, to make him look like a pig; and then he was said to have been punctured all over his body with sharp implements before being crucified, and his body then dropped in a well. Certain features recur across many versions of the gruesome story to identify the affair as a specifically ritual murder, defined by Langmuir as

> the killing of a human, not merely from motives of religious hatred, but in such a way that the form of the killing is at least partly determined by ideas allegedly or actually important in the religion of the killers or the victims.[7]

In the Anglo-Norman ballad, "Hugues de Lincoln," which appears to be the most contemporary chronicle and the one which displays the most local knowledge, Hugh is seized by a Jew named Peitevin and taken to the house of another Jew, Jopin. Jopin convenes his fellow Jews and leads Hugh into the gathering on the end of a rope, ritually to sell him to the other guests for thirty pieces of silver; this being accomplished, Hugh is disembowelled, has his heart removed and eaten by the throng, and is crucified. The ballad then details the murderers' increasingly frantic attempts to get rid of the body, all of which are frustrated in miraculous ways: buried, the body reappears above ground; thrown into a privy, it reappears

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[7] Ibid., 462.

again, covered in filth, to be discovered by a pious woman who alerts the ecclesiastical authorities.

In very many of the prose and lyric variants of the story there are repeated attestations that the body of the murdered child speaks or sings after his death, to enable recovery of the cadaver and discovery of the crime, or to accompany the procession of the body to Lincoln cathedral. This fact can help us to identify the status of the three verses which bring "Fatal Flower Garden" to its hauntingly equivocal end and to understand the peculiar resonance of its last three words: *I am dead.*

If the child, as the last three verses are sung, is only predicting or proclaiming the imminence of his death, or even speaking as the murder takes place (as in Harry Smith's description), we can agree that it is monstrous a child should be in the situation of knowing there are only a few moments remaining before an adult stranger deliberately takes his life. But if the child sings on after death, then the 'death' of this child must be considered a unique death; or, since, according to Jacques Derrida, every death is absolutely singular, "(no one can die in my place or in the place of the other)," this death may enjoy a *singular* singularity, because it is *sung*.[8] This is the case even if it is not uncommon in the folk tradition to have a song, or a portion of a song, delivered from the perspective of a dead person. In such cases, the stupefying statement is provided with a rational frame: the speaker is a revenant with a premonitory or recriminatory function which is enough to explain the fact of their return ("I Come and Stand at Every Door") or, as in the sea-shanty "Lowlands," the words "I am dead" are part of a speech from a deceased lover in a dream, reported to us later by the dreamer. The absence of a coda from the narrator who introduces the story of "Fatal Flower Garden"

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[8] Jacques Derrida, "Finis," in *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, 1-42 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 22.

permits the song's concluding phrase its maximum weight by rendering it unsettlingly inconclusive. Is it a condition worse than death, to be dead and still to be singing? The first two verses sung by the dead child tell of his plight in careful euphemisms to protect the sensibilities of his childish playmates and his mother; it seems that only his father is capable of bearing the full knowledge of his death. If the first two are not strictly true, though, neither is the truth of his death, since he is still singing. Or are the verses which decide not to admit his death more true than the final judgment, because he is still able to sing? Hugh, if we can call him that, is not a ghost; he is dead, but he hasn't died and come back to life; he is dead, but he hasn't died. Does death come with the full stop after "…I am dead"? In many renditions of the tale, Hugh's song enables the recovery of his body and only stops with the removal of a 'grain' from his mouth, said to have been placed there by the Virgin Mary. "Fatal Flower Garden" has him wait for death, after his death, and we get to listen to him waiting for the second death, the final obliteration that is postponed every time the song is played. Derrida's meditation, in an early text, on the phrase "I am alive" draws important consequences for "the ordinary story of language" from the fact that the phrase can still operate after the death of the subject of its enunciation, because "the signifying function of the *I* does not depend on the life of the speaking subject."[9] What is extraordinary about Hugh's utterance, "I am dead," is that the subject of the enunciation can still *enunciate* the phrase after his death. Nevertheless, Derrida's consideration of the status of the phrases "I am alive" and "I am dead," in his critique of Husserl's attribution of an ideal integrity to meaning transmissible via 'living' speech, usefully informs this commentary on Hugh's three last words: the experience of his murder has affected Hugh, but it has not affected him; in

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[9] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 96-97.

some mysterious way it has affected not to occur to him, it does not seem to modify him as a subject. The "I am" in "I am dead" still carries the day for the moment. What is involved in the situation where one can say that "I am dead" and be correct? Your life is necessary to the pronouncing of the sentence, and your death is necessary for its accuracy. The song stops on the word "dead," whereupon the guitars curl up in a hackneyed curlicue, a cursory, terminating flourish, the kind of sound which definitively ends a song; meanwhile, in the upper room, where no one can or will hear it, the impossible song may persist until the impossible happens (again) and he is heard.

It is appropriate to listen to the song as a recording, therefore. The phenomenon of recorded music matches the plight of Hugh: when we listen to Nelstone's Hawaiians, we are listening to breathless voices ventriloquize a voice without breath. But it must be admitted that all recorded versions of the ballad would do this same thing: why is this one the only version which seems to render this fact unavoidable? It is a combination of the elementary music, and the rudimentary vocals, plus, perhaps, the cumulative effect of all of the omissions with respect to the local details of the narrative, the eerily posthumous song, and the elision of the general historical context for its origin and development, and the ways that all of these interact with the surface noise due to the re-pressing of the record from Smith's own salvaged copy, where the hiss functions mimetically at first to represent the sheets of rain referred to in the first verse and to reinforce them as a premonition of doom. As Greil Marcus's essay, "The Old, Weird America," famously pointed out, the mind's ear could not but help to transform this inadvertent noise into a signal which contributed to communicating a sense of insurmountable historical and geographical distances when listening to the *Anthology* from its first appearance on:

> In 1952 fiddler Eck Dunford, blues guitarist Furry Lewis, the Eck Robertson and Family string band, bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Cannon's Jug Stompers

were only twenty or twenty-five years out of their time; cut off by the cataclysms of the Great Depression and the Second World War and by a national narrative that had never included their kind, they appeared now like visitors from another world, like passengers on a ship that had drifted into the sea of the unwritten. "All those guys on that Harry Smith *Anthology* were dead," Cambridge folkies Eric von Schmidt and Jim Rooney wrote in 1979, recalling how it seemed in the early 1960s, when most of Smith's avatars were very much alive. "*Had* to be."[10]

**Child-to-Child Transmission**

To conclude this essay I want to discuss the possibility that certain aspects of "Fatal Flower Garden" can best be explained as a result of the song being transmitted between children.

Karl Heinz Göller has claimed that "[t]here is much documentary evidence for the fact that children have known, appreciated, recited and transmitted ballads on Hugh of Lincoln."[11] He has also discussed in a note "two diametrically opposed types of variation" which he says are "typical of children's versions: rationalisation of incomprehensible words or content-matter, on the one hand, and addition of nonsense verse lines to complete metrical patterns on the

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[10] Greil Marcus, "The Old, Weird America," in *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, And Annotations Pertaining To The Anthology of American Folk Music* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997), 6.

[11] Karl Heinz Göller, "Sir Hugh of Lincoln. From History to Nursery Rhyme," in *Jewish Life and Jewish Suffering as Mirrored in English and American Literature* eds. Bernd Engler and Kurt Müller (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1987), 29.

other."[12] Before we discuss the pertinence of this statement for "Fatal Flower Garden," we ought to ask if these strategies can be confined to children's versions. There is a surfeit of corroborative data that child-to-child transmission exists, but its nature, in terms of a description of what might differentiate it from adult-to-adult or adult-to-child or child-to-adult transmission proves elusive because all of these processes seem to involve the same kinds of error, of error-correction, or of rationalization. Göller's "types of variation" overlap with the faceless, non-specific modifications assumed to be the work of (usually) anonymous 'folk.'

James Woodall has listed confusing or ludicrous lines from a host of versions of "Sir Hugh," and blamed them on the entirely predictable vitiation of texts when they are for the most part communicated orally/aurally. For example, discussing the reasons Hugh gives the Jew's daughter for his reluctance to enter her garden, Woodall provides the following:

> "Because my heart is blood" the senselessness of which screams corruption, is the reason in IV; because his mother, or, more logically, the female would make his blood fall, in six versions (XI, XII, XIII, XIV, and – because his mother would "make it the bloody ball" is obviously and amusingly a mishearing – XIX), because he has heard that whoever goes in never comes out in four versions (XX, XXI, XXII, XXV); because she is out of her head, in XXIII; - these are sufficient reasons. The rest of the versions are silent on reasons or illogical – mixtures or forgettings.[13]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] James R. Woodall, ""Sir Hugh": A Study in Balladry," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* XIX, no.1 (March 1955): 80.

Cecil J. Sharp, the great collector and interpreter of English folk culture, offers a similar illustration of the same phenomenon:

> How easily words will become corrupt when they convey no meaning to the singer is illustrated by the following incident. I once noted a set of words of "Little Sir Hugh" (F.S.F.S. III, No.68) from a very bright and intelligent singer. Her version of the ballad was a very full one and quite intelligible, except for the two opening lines which she sang as follows:
>
> Do rain, do rain, American corn,
>
> Do rain both great and small.
>
> The singer was quite unable to explain these astounding lines, but on comparing them with other recorded versions of the same ballad I discovered that they were but a corruption of,
>
> It do rain, it do rain in merry Lincoln,
>
> It do rain both great and small.
>
> To Somerset singers Lincoln is an unknown name, and the presence of this single and unintelligible word was enough to corrupt the meaning of the whole passage.[14]

Just as Woodall and Sharp attribute the tendency to invent and preserve nonsense lines which nevertheless complete the formal necessities of the verse to adult singers, Stamper and

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[14] Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*, 4th rev. ed., (Wakefield: EP Publishing Limited, 1907), 117-118.

Jensen, in their study of "Water Birch," a particularly interesting variant of "Sir Hugh" they recorded in Littcarr, Kentucky, in 1955, conjecture that

> "Sir Hugh" degenerated in Appalachia for two reasons, besides the usual one of bad transmission due to faulty hearing and memory: the particular religious prejudice involved in "Sir Hugh" would be practically incomprehensible in Appalachia; the murderess addressing her victim as "my little son" – obviously originally intended only as an ironic endearment and not a statement of relationship – would lead to confusions.[15]

This is a version of the other 'type of variation' that Göller imputes to children. Faith Hippensteel has confirmed that "Stamper and Jensen emphasize that ["Water Birch"] persisted because the folk artist recreated rational lines from existing puzzling ones."[16] It is obvious, then, that if I am going to persuade anyone that child-to-child transmission has left an impression on the text of "Fatal Flower Garden," that model of transmission will have to be re-defined and certain features of the text will need to be shown to be more likely to have been generated by the operation of this model than by any other option.

The kind of child-to-child transmission that I have in mind for this study is that which would occur between peers, or from older to younger siblings or schoolmates. It would only involve children who are old enough to reproduce accurately the sounds and the content that they hear from the children who perform the songs, even if they do not finally reproduce those

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[15] Frances C. Stamper and Wm. Hugh Jansen, ""Water Birch": An American Variant of "Hugh of Lincoln," *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no.279 (Jan-Mar 1958): 17-18.

[16] Faith Hippensteel, ""Sir Hugh": The Hoosier Contribution to the Ballad," *Indiana Folklore* 2:2 (1969): 88.

sounds and that content exactly. I want to rule out the involvement of a physically 'immature' language system which would introduce phonological variations on the source material thanks to its specific design features, because my argument depends upon the creative use of cognitive faculties associated with older children who are likely to be able to remember and to pass on a relatively coherent and sustained ballad form that gets modified in other ways.

As Göller has asserted, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that child-to-child transmission of versions of "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter" has taken place, though we can demur at the often-expressed idea that there are 'pure' channels of communication between children that rarely or never attract the attention or involvement of the adult world. William Wells Newell, writing in the "Editor's Note" to the first edition in 1883 of his landmark *Games and Songs of American Children*, declares the book to be "devoted to the formulas of play which children have preserved from generation to generation, without the intervention, often without the knowledge, of older minds."[17] Like Newell, Iona and Peter Opie, in their *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, tend to minimise or rule out adult mediation or interference in the process of child-to-child transmission, though they and other commentators admit that it is subject to the same laws of adaptation and mutation which affect transmission between adults, even if the transformations happen for different reasons. Myers, for example, proposes that there is a sort of entropic decay of sense into nonsense as "[r]hymes travel from older brothers and sisters or schoolmates to younger, so they go beyond the circles where their implications are understood."[18] This has to be considered

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[17] William Wells Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children* (London and New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1883), xix.

[18] Greg Myers, "Playground poetry," *English Today* 38, vol.10, no.2 (April 1994): 38.

alongside an opposing tendency in children, much remarked upon, steadfastly to preserve what does not makes sense, to reproduce with resolute accuracy the inaccuracies of other transmitters. Newell argues that:

> The formulas of play are as Scripture, of which no jot or tittle is to be repealed. Even the inconsequent rhymes of the nursery must be recited in the form in which they first become familiar; as many a mother has learned, who has found the versions familiar to her own infancy condemned as inaccurate, and who is herself sufficiently affected by superstition to feel a little shocked, as if a sacred canon had been irreligiously violated.[19]

And the Opies make the same point, putting a somewhat crude ethnological spin on Newell's theological simile:

> No matter how uncouth schoolchildren may outwardly appear, they remain tradition's warmest friends. Like the savage, they are respecters, even venerators, of custom; and in their self-contained community their basic lore and language seems scarcely to alter from generation to generation.[20]
>
> The faithfulness with which one child after another sticks to the same formulas even of the most trivial nature is remarkable.[21]

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[19] Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children*, 28.

[20] Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, rev. ed., (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2.

[21] Ibid., 4.

There exists evidence that "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter," in its various guises, has been of some special interest to children and may therefore have been particularly popular for child-to-child transmission. A Miss Juliet Fauntleroy takes down one variant, named "It Rained a Mist," on 30 April, 1915, in Virginia, for a collection of the state's traditional ballads edited by Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr. In the notes provided, she writes that "[t]his ballad was sung to me by one of my pupils, Jesse Burgess, whose brother had heard it sung by a boy in Greensboro, North Carolina. Jesse Burgess is a boy of fourteen, but only in the first grade."[22] Göller, as we have learned, refers to a considerable amount of

> documentary evidence for the fact that children have known, appreciated, recited and transmitted ballads on Hugh of Lincoln. Why such a subject matter as this should have held a special appeal for children has not yet been explained. This is part of the problem of the suitability of nursery rhymes for children, dealing as they do with murder and manslaughter, incest, adultery and so on.[23]

Faith Hippensteel provides two hypotheses to explain this "special appeal": adults' rejection of the miraculous event and children's willingness to accept it, since they belong "to an age group where miracles are accepted as everyday happenings" and a more mundane but more persuasive reason, that variants of "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter" persist because they are "used by an older sibling to make the younger children cry."[24] So, if we are willing to accept the premise that children do transmit versions of the song between each other, for their

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[22] Arthur Kyle Davis Jr., ed., *Traditional Ballads of Virginia, Collected under the auspices of the Virginia Folk-lore Society*, 2nd ed., (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1929), 407.

[23] Göller, "Sir Hugh of Lincoln. From History to Nursery Rhyme," 29.

[24] Hippensteel, ""Sir Hugh": The Hoosier Contribution to the Ballad," 88.

own reasons, how might this impact upon a section I have chosen to isolate from the rest of "Fatal Flower Garden," the lines "Oh take these finger-rings off of my fingers, / Smoke them with your breath"? First of all, following Newell and the Opies, we have proposed that children may be more prepared than adults to tolerate and preserve just what they have heard, or misheard, despite its incoherence, though this is probably better explained by their relative uncertainty over what counts as nonsense and what doesn't, rather than some innate linguistic conservatism from which they will later liberate themselves.[25] A child is more likely to be uncertain about the identification of nonsense than an adult because they are at a stage where their cognitive and linguistic abilities to oversee and interpret the signs they receive, and to coordinate them with the relevant context, are not yet fully developed. This is a factor upon which the gypsy lady's seduction strategy depends for its success: the child's vulnerability in relation to the production and maintenance of misapprehensions. Studies of errors detected in early child language production have shown that though "child errors respect grammatical category," "[c]hildren are far more prone to produce segments and sequences that are neither in the target nor in the source, leading to feature errors, to clusters that do not also exist in the environment."[26] Though I ruled out the rôle of very young children in the kind of transmission I wish to discuss, it may be valid to assume then that, to an extent, children at a certain age may be prone to interpretative errors which strike an adult as more irrelevant to the content and context of a dialogue than the typical errors that adults would make. The resources which adults have at their disposal for the detection and correction of mishearings are likely to be more responsive and more confidently interventionist than those available to

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[25] Myers, "Playground poetry," 37.

[26] Joseph Paul Stemberger, "Speech Errors in Early Child Language Production," *Journal of Memory and Language* 28 (1989): 170, 187.

children. Mishearings, which are then preserved in a ballad variant and passed on from child to child stand a chance of being less related to and dependent upon the rest of the song, and this could be the case especially in the particular context of the transmission of versions of "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter," because the child listener's anticipations and preconceptions are likely to be considerably minimised and more vague in their reception of this strange and frightening story-in-a-song than they would be in the context of everyday conversation. The situation would make mishearing more likely and also work to ensure that particular mishearings would be preserved even when the material made little or no sense in relation to the rest of the song.

If we turn now to the actual lines

> Oh take these finger-rings off of my fingers,
>
> Smoke them with your breath;

we can first of all register a number of odd or anomalous details. The fact that rings have been placed on his fingers makes us aware that there has been a lacuna in the narration, between the previous verse detailing his confinement to the upper room, and this protest. We might want to ask ourselves, "Take these finger-rings off of *my fingers*?" From where else would one be likely to wish a finger-ring removed? And who uses the word 'finger-ring' anyway? It does not appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The rings he implores the Gypsy Lady to remove from his fingers can be considered the gold rings which did not tempt him at the beginning of their encounter. *In extremis* now, they are an intolerable burden and evidence of a foolish complicity in his own fate; the desperate plea for their extraction is a request for an act of mercy, that his own acceptance of the bargain could be overlooked and rescinded. But how are we supposed to interpret the order to "[s]moke them with your breath"? Smoke the finger-rings with your breath? It would seem marginally less unlikely to

do that than if the child was instructing the gypsy lady to smoke his fingers with her breath. What would it mean for her, for him, if she were to smoke the finger-rings with her breath? Why would he wish her to do that, where he is? Children and adults are both able and likely to invent nonsense as a rational response to incomprehensible words or mishearings but, I have suggested, in the performance and reception of a song, child-to-child transmission is more likely to result in the preservation of a species of nonsense less worked-over and integrated into the rest of the song than the sort that an adult might be expected to produce.

Here a slight but discernible force is exerted by the child's plight, since the forcible putting of rings on his fingers sounds like part of some exotic ritual or gender-specific humiliation. But in other versions of the song, as we have seen, much worse things happen during his torture and murder. None of the many dozens of variants, collected from regions all over Great Britain and the United States, exhibit anything quite like this moment from "Fatal Flower Garden" and there are no extant lines in other versions phonologically similar enough to allow us to trace a mishearing back to a legitimate and explicable source-text. If I were to push for a speculative interpretation of the lines, it might be just too much to suggest that "finger-rings" is an importation by a younger child of the hardly-grasped colloquialism 'fingering,' descriptive of the sexual groping practiced by adolescents, but the injunction to "[s]moke them with your breath" appears to me to be evidence of a prevailing childish fascination with the phenomenon of smoke-rings, rising in the air from the exhalations of their elders. The particle 'ring' – present in the first line but elided in the second - would operate as a signifier connecting the lines by a phonetic match between very different usages, (finger-)rings, 'fingering' and (smoke-)rings, a match which encourages their mysterious association, akin to the yoking together of extreme disparities in surrealist metaphors. A child ignorant of the sexual sense of "fingering" who attempts to make sense of it nonetheless could well imagine that it has something to do with other kinds of 'rings,' such as mother's

earrings or her wedding ring, alluring adornments that can also appear intuitively to the child as unwelcome impositions, since they are things which cannot simply be taken off, caught up as they are in a symbolic economy as signs of sexual maturity and experience. The forced wearing of the rings could then have been part of a parodic marriage ceremony or premature sexual initiation which has taken place in the interim, the parody of a ceremony the boy will never now properly undertake, just as in prior versions of the story his drawn-out execution was meant as a mockery of the scourging and crucifixion of Christ. And since the lines so obviously concern an anguished protest against an experience he fervently wishes now not to have undergone, "Smoke them with your breath" can stand revealed as an ingenious variation of the same demand, if it is read as meaning "Turn these rings to smoke with your breath." If it is in an adult's power to make a ring out of smoke, then surely she can turn a ring *into* smoke: the distinction between those separate feats might be academic to a child. These ideas may not amount to a fully tenable description of how the lines were arrived at but, as I have argued, their only partial plausibility doesn't require that the lines be integrated into the narrative represented in the rest of the song if we are prepared to accept it as an instance of child-to-child transmission; in fact, the more inexplicable the lines are in their immediate context and in the context of all other variants on the *ur*-text, the more plausible their identification as the outcome of child-to-child transmission is likely to be. Vikman has argued that "instead of demonstrating a desire to achieve clarity in their speech [children] demonstrate a desire to achieve efficiency in performance," and if the measure of the efficiency of your performance is how long and how hard you made your younger sibling cry then the lines' atmosphere of obscure cruelty and threat, with their troubling glimpses of

adult activities, may work well in the achievement of that goal.[27] The elided local context for the song in child-to-child transmission, once restored, explains certain of its features as the result of an analysis, by children, of its elliptical mysteries, combined with their reasonable mishearings and misunderstandings, with the consequence that the 'final' text is well on its way from its beginnings in the lurid fiction of ritual murder to a more immediately relevant terror about which you have repeatedly been warned: enticement by a stranger, kidnap and sexual molestation. But it is in the power of these lines to *obstruct* our adult interpretation that I find the most arresting idea, that in their peculiar and poetic quality it is possible to hear "Fatal Flower Garden" and detect the trace of a 'real' child, or 'real' children, even if that notion can only abide as a flicker of pathos attached to the idea of its, or their, indeterminate particularity, and to the order of unspecifiable childish misapprehensions, inventions and torments.

Are we any closer to answering the question with which this essay opened? When we listen to "Fatal Flower Garden" by Nelstone's Hawaiians the lacunae which determine the song's curtailed and deformed matrix lend it a sense of inexorability discernible too in each of the accounts of the death of Hugh of Lincoln and its horrible aftermath. This happens to be matched by the idiosyncratic performance style of Nelstone's Hawaiians, in which a traditional impersonality is intensified by a benumbed dissociation from the text. Moses Asch, in his "General Notes on the Series," printed in the original Handbook for the *Anthology* affirms a crucial criterion for a song's inclusion in the collection, that "the musical rendition had to be of the nature before radio or talking pictures had influenced the rendition

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[27] Marilyn May Vikman, "Phonology and the development of the lexicon: evidence from children's errors," *Journal of Child Language* 8, issue 02 (June 1981): 241.

of the musician and the singer."[28] Although Asch doesn't spell out which qualities in particular Smith would be listening for that could identify a song's belonging in the *Anthology*, his remark does communicate that those qualities would certify the obsolescent nature of the song's execution. Nelson and Touchstone's insensate delivery of "Fatal Flower Garden" fulfils and exceeds their era's convention of impassivity in vocal performance, even as their opportunistic choice of instrumentation seems accidentally to herald the imminent virtues and vices of subjective expression. Ventriloquizing the latest incarnation of Hugh, Nelstone's Hawaiians are unwitting and inadequate vessels for the muffled echoes of a medieval and murderous prejudice and for the parts dictated to them by relays of anonymous, spooked children: their desiccated performance is dead to aspects of the song that they nevertheless find themselves singing. This incontrovertible fact, together with the mesmeric appeal of the text and the worn-out sound of the recording, conspire to make "Fatal Flower Garden" the most unfailingly resonant version of the story of "Little Sir Hugh" that there ever could be. The customary practice of their detached performance style involved a certain distancing of themselves from themselves, a temporary deadening of their own subjective identities in the service of the song, and this bears out the intuition of Eric von Schmidt and Jim Rooney, that "[a]ll those guys…were dead," in the sense that they could not but be dead and in the sense that they were, in a number of ways, under an obligation to be dead. To be dead before they had died, to sing this song the way they knew to sing it. *Had* to be.

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[28] Moses Asch, "General Notes on this Series," in *Handbook to Anthology of American Folk Music,* 2nd ed. Smithsonian Folkways (Washington, D.C., Folkways, 1962), n.p.

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