
UNIT 4 LITERARY BEGINNINGS – ORAL LITERATURE

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This section will introduce certain aspects of the oral traditions within the Aboriginal and early settler communities. Two broad aims of this section are to show the need to broaden the traditional boundaries of 'Literature' to include oral traditions and to show how they have influenced the more conventional forms of written literature in Australia.

4.1 ORAL LITERATURE – A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

The fact that the phrase 'oral literature' seems like a contradiction in terms tells us about the assumptions that have become connected with the word 'Literature' in academic and cultural discussions. Though in most cultures the narrative traditions that eventually developed into written forms have had a very strong oral aspect, the inclusion of literary studies at different levels of education, with the emphasis on the printed word, has often led to this aspect being ignored. This has been felt even within literary studies programmes, especially in relation to genres such as drama and poetry. A purely text-centred focus in these cases takes away much from those aspects of these forms, which deal with performance and the spoken word.

Literature has also become in certain circumstances a term implying superiority in relation to popular cultural forms. Oral forms such as Aboriginal song cycles, colonial ballads and bush songs are often seen to fall outside the scope of literary studies on the grounds of their oral nature as well as their origins in folklore or so-called popular culture. Just as new ways of thinking about culture has questioned the constructedness of divisions like high culture/low culture, it has also questioned the importance given to the written word over the oral. Cultural studies programmes now see the need to include as many aspects of cultural production for a more complete picture of the ways in which people have expressed themselves.

In the study of Australian literature, oral forms are of great importance. To overlook the existence of Aboriginal song cycles passed on from generation to generation, simply because they do not fit conventional literary paradigms would be similar to the colonial act of dismissing Aboriginal cultural values simply because they were not easy to understand from the point of view of European models of civilization and culture. To bypass the rich popular tradition of convict ballads and bush songs that was born during the early phases of colonization would be to lose sight of some of the dominant influences that came to be part of some of the early written forms of the island-continent and its cultural consciousness. Just as the boundaries of 'English

literature' have been widened to include more than the literature of the British Isles, there is also a need for the range of 'literature' to become more flexible and inclusive.

4.2 ABORIGINAL TRADITIONS

Any search for starting points will be dependent upon what is thought of before hand as a 'beginning' for the purpose. In the article 'White on Black / Black on Black', Adam Shoemaker identifies as one of the problems in any attempt to search for literary beginnings with respect to Aboriginal writing, the question of whether we adopt the traditional parameters of Literature being primarily "poetry, drama and verse" or "consider Black Australian writings to encompass any meaningful inscriptions: petitions (in any medium), diaries, letters, song lyrics, transcribed oral narratives, message sticks, sermons, carvings, rock art, body markings, drawings, speeches, articles and submissions"(10). He recommends the latter, more open definition. The point however, remains that the framework used shapes and conditions the nature of the product. In the case of Aboriginal culture and literature, the models of reference have most often been imposed from outside. Shoemaker says:

The historical dates which constitute what is known as 'chronological time' have often been used to imprison Australia's indigenous people. Terms such as 'prehistory' and 'preliteracy' carry with them the strongest possible sense of a time before – and a time after. Of course, these dividing lines have been imposed retrospectively upon Black Australians by those who are not members of that culture. Such arbitrary demarcations also imply that the past begins when it is recorded in legible script, not when human beings began to commit stories to memory.

What cannot be ignored is the fact that scores of Aboriginal verbal artists have told and re-told tales which defy datable chronology. (9)

Instead of joining the "tyrannical quest for 'the earliest poem' or the 'first letter in English'", Shoemaker states the need to "explore the signposts of *all* indigenous Australian literature"(9).

Ken Goodwin says that the rich oral tradition of the Aborigines may be as old as the existence of human language in Australia, which he puts at "some 40,000 years"(8). According to him this tradition includes in its fold long song cycles often of a sacred nature, briefer communal songs and narratives. The themes may be sacred, concerning public or contemporary events, dealing with topics such as love, marriage, birth, death and war or telling mythical tales of the beginning of the universe. "Much also concerns the right relationships that human beings must have with the land, its creatures, relatives and others in the clan, and the spirits: some of it is concerned with sacred sites, some of it with secret symbols whose meaning is known only to the initiated"(8), catalogues Goodwin as he tries to provide a brief overview of the subject.

The oral traditions of the Aborigines had deep spiritual and communal meaning and were often associated with the mythical time of the Dreaming. The Dreaming is an English term used to capture what is expressed in different Aboriginal languages using different words with slightly different meaning within different Aboriginal cultural frameworks. In very simplified general terms it refers to the collection of ancient narratives of creation and the beginning of cultural practices, beliefs and values within Aboriginal communities prior to British colonization. The customs of the Dreaming include a way of talking, seeing, knowing and socio-cultural practices which are in themselves as mysterious and beautiful as any poetry. These oral traditions, just like other Aboriginal art forms, were not primarily aesthetic but had

specific functions within the social network of the Aboriginal communities. They were born of the close relationship cultivated by the people living on the land, travelling through it, naming it and constantly making new songs and stories to tell what the land presented or meant to them. The oral tradition was also the primary way of passing on the communal treasure of knowledge. Take this translated example from the Pilbara district of Western Australia.

Sit with dignity and talk with composure!
No small talk! Elaborate on this:
What means more to you: The silly splinter that went in?
Or the spirit from heaven – which you really are –
To wait in the waterhole?

(Cited in Shoemaker, 12)

Mudrooroo Narogin in *Writing from the Fringe* is of the opinion that the importance of this oral tradition lies also in the fact that “it describes Aboriginal lifestyles before the invasion”(6). To put this tradition into a framework that may be more easy to understand for western thinking, Mudrooroo adds “the surviving fragments” of this tradition “are important to Aborigines and others as a classical literature. In future it may serve as the basis for the written literature. They are as important to the Aborigines as the *Iliad* is to Europeans”(7). In a later edition of this book, *Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, also points out the importance of these oral records in reconstructing Aboriginal history. Epics such as the *Djanggalawul* from Arnhem Land, and the *Wati Kadjara* epic, for example, reveal how Aboriginal communities who came to the land and became its inhabitants, completely disprove the *terra nullius* proposition.

Let us rest on our paddles, brother,
Let us rest, for I am tired.
What is happening there, brother,
My body aches with tiredness,
I worry because of our sacred emblems;
I am tired because we threw them away.
Now we are close to the shore,
Now our journey, our paddling is over.
We land on the beach at Port Bradshaw.
This is our country, plant our flag here,
We have arrived, O brother. (17-18)

Adam Shoemaker deals in ‘White on Black / Black on Black’ primarily with Black Australian writing in English and discusses some aspects of the nature of English influence in early Aboriginal texts in the language. In translation, Aboriginal song cycles appeared first in the works of anthropologists such as T.G.H. Strehlow’s *Aranda Traditions* (1947) and *Songs of Central Australia* (1971); Catherine and Ronald Berndt’s collaborative work in *Djanggalawul* (1952) as well as Ronald Berndt’s *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* and *Three Faces of Love* (1976). These song cycles belonged primarily to the public domain of Aboriginal society, as most sacred songs were either to be performed only in the midst of the initiated or were restricted on the basis of gender. As a result, the song cycles made available for translation consist of a very small segment of a rich tradition of Aboriginal lore.

Shoemaker goes on to show the other problems that limit the attempt of making Aboriginal oral forms available for an audience basically familiar with the English language and written medium. In presenting Aboriginal song cycles in English and in the form of written texts, yet another series of cultural translations come into play.

Public song cycles – which involve all members of a community – have intrinsic relationship with travelling and journeying (both in the geographic and the mythical sense); they showcase music dance, mime and storytelling skills in a way to which no English transcript on the page can do justice. (11)

Shoemaker argues that when these songs are then reprinted as excerpts in anthologies and collections, such as Rodney Hall's inclusion of the Wonguri-Mandijigai 'Moon-Bone Song' in the *Collins Book of Australian Poetry* (1981), they are often placed at the beginning of such collections "as if they were a preface to the contemporary world of Australian writing, mired in the past"(11).

However, these song cycles are very much a part of the cultural heritage and framework of Aboriginal Australians even today. The rhythms and the patterns of these traditional song cycles are even employed to put across issues of contemporary importance in the texts of Black Australian writers such as in Mudrooroo's cycle of 35 poems in *The Song Circle of Jacky* (1986).

On Nadoc day a youthman strangled in a cell:
Who killed him; who were his murderers?
'Not I,' said the cop, 'I only took him in.'
'Not I,' said the town, 'I never spoke his name,
It's no fault of mine that he had to die –
We treat them as we would our own,
There's no racism in our town. (46)

Shoemaker also cites (12-13) variations on the translated songs that exist in the form of dual-text material published in an Aboriginal language and English. Examples of this can be found in *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland* (1904) and the more recent *Stories of Obed Raggett* (1980) which is in Pintupi/ Luritja and English.

These Aboriginal traditions also found their way into the Jindyworobak movement that became important between the 1930s and 1950s. The Adelaide based group that started this movement had at its forefront **Rex Ingamells** who adapted the Aboriginal word 'Jindyworobak' which means 'to annex' or 'join' to name a movement that tried to mark a break from colonial traditions that focussed on Europe by associating itself with Australian Aboriginal ones. Ken Goodwin says the movement used the term 'Jindyworobak' in particular and traces of Aboriginality in general, as indicative of a 'distinctive Australian quality in literature' (Goodwin, 134). Ken Goodwin quotes Ingamells as averring: 'From Aboriginal art and song we must learn much of new technique; from Aboriginal legend, sublimated through our thought, we must achieve something of a pristine outlook on life.'(134) This movement tried to adopt Aboriginal traditions to develop a distinctly Australian tradition that drew inspiration and materials from the land and the cultural creations of the Aborigines. The movement tried to move away from the colonial legacy of British and European models and language in literature through an almost romantic glorification of all things Aboriginal. The superficial adoption of Aboriginal themes, words and motifs for a 'postcolonial' cultural agenda that only redefined the relationship between white members of the colony and the metropolitan centre has been criticised. Shoemaker comments in *Black Words White Page*, "their usage of the ostensible trappings of Black Australian languages was indicative of a kind of souvenir mentality" (57).

4.3 COLONIAL TRADITIONS

The oral traditions that arose during the early phase of colonization sprung from the social environment of the penal system and that of the pastoral stations in the bush. Many times the latter was a continuation of the former as former convicts, on completing their sentence, were encouraged to settle on the land or serve as travelling

labourers linked to local stations. Speaking of the period till the 1850s, Ian Turner says:

The conquest of the land had been half a century of violence: many men had been destroyed, and some had destroyed themselves. But, so far, few had paused to write it down. For the new colonial upper class, the act of possession was necessarily the transplantation of a culture: except for the works of description, designed to satisfy or whet the metropolitan appetite, the journals of the first colonists and the explorers, and the uniformly derivative poems of nostalgia or hope, there was as yet no literary response. The colonies held few attractions for men of literary culture or pretence, and what power of imagery and words the accounts and journals had was incidental to their main purposes of conveying information, awakening interest. It was in the unwritten literature of the lower and further out segments of colonial society that there came the first distinct – and distinctive – imaginative response. (22)

These colonial oral traditions were very much a part of the popular culture of the new colonies of Australia. The characters and environments they described however passed into the more formally recognized 'literary' traditions as well and were soon used to symbolize the 'distinctly Australian' in literature and what was projected as national culture.

4.3.1 Convict Traditions

The ballads created by the convict community made a vibrant and colourful oral literature that captured this group's response to the natural and social environment of the penal system and Australia. The genre was a natural continuation of the folk ballads and narratives that the lower social classes of British society and those of Irish descent produced in the colonial centre. Edgar Waters in 'Ballads and Popular Verse' traces them back to the broadside ballads of the metropolitan centre (293-4).

Life within the Penal System provided the themes that were dealt with in these oral pieces. Ian Turner elaborates:

The ballads of the convicts expressed their situation: at first the sentiment was nostalgic, and sometimes mock-repentant, with an ironic acceptance of the moralizing of their judges and goalers; later (say by the 1820s although it is impossible to date the ballads precisely), the nostalgia disappeared, and the spirit was hatred and defiance of the authorities, fear or bravado for the brutalities of the System, admiration for those who bucked it (notably the successful escapees), and a bitter humour which set out to subvert the moral values of their betters.(16)

Waters documents (294-5) how in the second half of the nineteenth century many of these ballads and bushrangers were regarded as "treason songs" by officials and though there is no evidence of a formal ban, the performance of these ballads in public places could result in a night in prison. Two of the most popular ballads of this period, which are still extant are 'Bold Jack Donahue' and 'The Wild Colonial Boy'. The opening stanzas and chorus of the latter run:

'Tis of a wild Colonial boy, Jack Doolan was his name,
Of poor but honest parents he was born in Castlemaine.
He was his father's only hope, his mother's only joy,
And dearly did his parents love this wild Colonial boy.

Chorus

Come, all my hearties, we'll roam the mountains high,
Together we will plunder, together we will die,
We'll wander over valleys, and gallop over plains,
And we'll scorn to live in slavery, bound down with iron chains.

He was scarcely sixteen years of age when he left his father's home,
And through Australia's sunny clime a bushranger did roam.
He robbed those wealthy squatters, their stock he did destroy,
And a terror to Australia was the wild Colonial boy.

The challenge and treason written into these verses presents its central figure in the same cultural light as the literary and folklore traditions that surround a figure like Robin Hood.

4.3.2 The Bush Tradition

The bush fraternity of Australia was a loose nomadic community that reached its creative peak in the thirty years of the post-gold rush outback boom. It inherited something of the pre-gold tradition as well. Hugh Anderson quotes a 1923 issue of the *North Queenslander Register* which says that almost every cattle run had "...generally someone who could turn out bush jingle of a sort. Some of these verses were remarkably good, and it has to be regretted that most of them are now forgotten"(34). Anderson also quotes Edward Sorenson, who had spent his life in a variety of bush occupations and contributed regularly to the *Bulletin*. Sorenson felt that the isolation of life in the outback was responsible for the popularity and spread of this forceful tradition: "With nobody to talk to and seldom anything to read, the solitary bloke either yarns to himself or turns to writing. Very often he does both." (cited in Anderson, 35).

The colonial traditions of ballads and bushsongs may have had a strong anti-establishment tone at the original time of their creation and popularity. However, with time and the change of social environments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these very pieces and the characters they immortalized became very much a part of the establishment's sense of cultural identity. Early colonial writers such as **Alan Lindsay Gordan**, '**Banjo**' **Paterson** and **Henry Lawson** drew on these traditions in their verse and prose writing. The *Bulletin* school of writing, started in the 1880s, saw the bush and its cultural creations as an ideal source to tap in the literary creation of a characteristically Australian identity. Ian Turner writes of the output of this ballad community:

It was eclectic as to sources: it drew its melodies from the popular songs of drawing-room or music-hall, or from folksong (commonly Irish), and created its texts by parodying, or by re-writing the more 'literary' productions of the homestead, or by the creation of rough verses of its own. Its language was, however, all its own – colourful and not uncommonly lurid. It had two kinds of 'hero': the bushranger, whom it revered...and the 'flash' bushman, whom it cut down to size. Its characteristic attitudes, as evidenced in its yarns as well as its ballads, were admiration for daring and resourcefulness; dislike for the law and the squatter; contempt for the cocky-farmer, the new-chum, and the coloured races; deflation, not unmixed with wry self-recognition...and a sardonic spitting in the eye of fate. This was a living, unlettered, popularly created literature – the last in Australian history – and it was of considerable importance, because so much of its spirit, even its language and style, passed into more formal literary expression in the 1890s (30-1)

4.4 LET US SUM UP

The oral traditions of the Aborigines and of early colonial settlers in Australia are a store of information about the cultures and peoples that created them. Both streams of oral traditions have been adopted at different instances to project within a more traditional literary framework, the notion of a distinct Australian identity in opposition to the Eurocentric colonial literary legacy.

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. Why is an awareness of oral traditions significant in the study of Australian literature?
2. Discuss some of the problems involved in studying Aboriginal oral traditions within a conventional English literature framework.
3. Explore how the anti-establishment oral tradition of colonial ballads was eventually adopted as symbolic of authentic 'Australianness' within its literary tradition.

4.6 WORKS CITED

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