

**What is drawn?
What is written?
What is spoken?
What is sung?**

An Introduction to World Poetry

by Brian Lee

Some cultures don't write things down. They remember what they have to and they only draw pictures to recall the telling of something. Maybe there's nothing to write on. Or maybe there's only skin to write on or the walls of a cave.

- Skin is portable but impermanent, so are leaves.
- Cave drawings are permanent but are not portable.
- Later there's papyrus, parchment, vellum; portable not cheap and each page must be copied by hand.
- Then there's paper and in 15th century Europe there's printing
- Then with the industrial revolution there's mechanisation and the beginnings of mass literacy.

And the readers and writers look down on those who do not read and write, those who only speak and listen.

And the world becomes a string (an array, a matrix) of alphanumerical characters, of silent words and numbers frozen on the page.

But when the written word is separated from the spoken and the sung, it dies. The signifier becomes a parasite that eventually kills its host, the signified. Written words become maggots that devour the corpse of the real world.

Bringing the world back to life

Modernism among artists grew out of this death of the world. There was a wish to return to the pre-literate/pre-Christian/pre-imperial world – to rediscover the living, the vital wherever it could be found.

Some travelled back to the past:

- The pre-Raphaelite painters back to an imagined time before Raphael.
- The Irish poet W.B. Yeats back to a Celtic twilight
- The Austrian composer Anton Webern back to medieval counterpoint.

Some tried to travel back to more primitive zones of the mind

- The Surrealists to the irrational processes of the unconscious
- Jean Dubuffet and the Art Brut movement to the art of madness
- Stravinsky and Roerich to the pre-civilised paganism of the *Rite of Spring*

Others sought out different cultures to find the life that their own had lost:

- Hungarian composer Bela Bartok travelled to the villages of Hungary and Slovakia with his primitive recording equipment; one of the first to record original folk songs.

- Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh found inspiration in Japanese prints.
- French composer Claude Debussy found in the music of the Indonesian gamelan the means to escape from the dead hand of western harmonic composition.
- Pablo Picasso found new forms in the sculpture of African cultures (see *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907)

Problems of translation

But in order to understand the poetry of other cultures, we usually need a translation. And in particular, when we are translating from a very different culture that often means that the mind-set of the translator will get in the way. For example, during the colonial period, the poetic arts of other cultures (mostly the cultures of literate societies, the Arab world, Persia, China and Japan) were rendered into the high language of the European bourgeoisie because that was their idea of what poetry was.

The beloved version of the Rubaiyat by Omar Khayyam was translated by Edward FitzGerald (1859) from Farsi and dressed in the finery of Victorian English – the rhyming metered lines, the archaic formulations, the inversions all typifying the high language so self-consciously different from everyday speech.

*Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand was in the Sky
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,
"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup
Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."*

The black reflux

This way of translating other cultures went on until the nineteen twenties when jazz and blues emerge from the negro ghettos and are heard and spoken and sung, bringing such freshness and directness of communication that it sweeps the world. The blues brings back an oral tradition to the English language. It rubs and slides in new rhythms – giving a new musicality to demotic speech; played on gramophones, broadcast on the radio, even influencing the high culture of the modernists: Stravinsky, Ravel, T.S. Eliot, Mondrian and others.

The English language cops the reflux of the colonial period and is recolonised by the speech rhythms of Africa. This is what is sung, the international language of rock and pop music.

But why English and not the other main colonial languages, French and Spanish (also Portuguese and Dutch)? Because the erratic and unpredictable nature of English spelling means that there is a weaker connection between spoken and written language. Most continental European languages suffer from consistent orthographies which grant an authority to the written word - you know how to read the word from the way it's written. This locks speech to text rather than the other way round. English however, due its relative lack of reliance on the written word, allows far greater flexibility of pronunciation – you have to hear the word before you know how to say it – and this is what has made it possible for the spoken language to undergo a shift to jazz rhythms.

So it is in the United States that Black vernacular English becomes a literary language. The poetry and plays of Langston Hughes, the first Black American to make his living as a writer, use the language of jazz and the blues, the phrasing, the idioms, the musicality.

Sun Song

*Sun and softness
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth
Sun and the song of the sun-stars
Gathered together -
Dark ones of Africa
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads*

Langston Hughes

The modernist revolution in English language poetry brought about by writers like T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound was essentially a collage technique. Jamming different voices together, in a cut and edit way, like a film, like a radio broadcast. Abolishing the idea that poetry should be written (and read) in a poetic voice.

Poets and anthropologists

With the 'happy new ears' (thanks John Cage) given to us by jazz, we can go back and listen to the songs of indigenous people – people not totally assimilated into the culture of their colonial masters – and listen afresh.

The academic anthropologists who learn the obscure native languages of Africa, Oceania and the Americas and who record the words of songs with greater or lesser degrees of sensitivity to the poesis and musicality of language. Then the poets who find these texts and with their ears retuned by jazz and blues, refashion the often dry literalness of the academics into something new, something totally different from the overblown language of the nineteenth century romantics which is most people's idea of poetry.

Sometimes the anthropologist is a person of sensitivity and maybe genius. The translations from Inuit languages (Eskimo) of Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen are an example. Another is the work by Frances Densmore among the Native peoples of North America. Her simple, direct, uncluttered, unliterarified language needs no reworking to stand as poetry that transcends culture:

*older sister
 come out
I bring horses
 come out
you may have one*

Swift Dog

Among poets, the work of Ezra Pound should be noted in this regard. This complex and multifaceted writer developed the style of imagism based on the work of Ernest Fenellosa in translating from Chinese. He also ventured into other historical high cultures such as Greek, Egyptian and Anglo-Saxon. Occasionally he re-worked pieces translated from tribal languages. His "Praise Song of the Buck Hare" (see Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* (sic) or Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*) is from a German translation of an earlier Russian version of a poem from an oral original of the Teleut people of the Kemerovo region of Siberia. Despite this chain, the poem in Pound's version still smells fresh.

*I am the buck hare, I am,
The shore is my playground
Green underwood is my feeding*

*I am the buck hare, I am,
What's that damn man got wrong with him?
Skin with no hair on, that's his trouble ...*

Some indigenous poetry has been kept for posterity by the labour of love of one individual. In the late 1860s W.H. Bleek, a German linguist came across Bushmen of the /Xam people who had been convicted of crimes and used as labourers in the construction of Cape Town harbour. Bleek learned their language and spent many hours interviewing three of the men, //Kabbo, /Han#kasso and Dialkwain. The result was twelve thousand pages of poetry song and folklore that would otherwise have been lost but are currently preserved in Cape Town university.

Other pieces have been preserved through recordings. The chants of healer and shaman María Sabina of the Mazatec people of Mexico were recorded in her home village in Oaxaca in 1956 and later translated into Spanish and thence into English.

But the main proponent of the literature of indigenous peoples is poet Jerome Rothenberg whose anthologies *Shaking the Pumpkin* and *Technicians of the Sacred* are indispensable.

Each indigenous tribal culture exists in its own way. Some have gone through a literary revival. Among the Native American peoples there are many. Simon Ortiz, a contemporary poet of the Acoma Pueblo writes in English, keeping a continuity between the present and the past.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, poet and songwriter of the Saami (Lapp) people whose work has been translated into English, works in a strong awareness of nature and the spiritual traditions of his people.

*The world
So great
Frightening
People
So great
Wise
They are born
Multiply
Attempt to think
Waste
Pollute
Poison*

*At Ádjajohka there is
the same clear spring water*

For now

The influence of ethnic poetry

This retranslation and rediscovery of the poetry of oral traditions has been influencing western poets since the Dadaist, Tristan Tzara discovered African poetry. His *Poèmes Negres* were prepared for publication in 1916 but are only now available in English translation by Pierre Joris. His fellow Dadaist Kurt Schwitters explored sound poetry in his *Ursonate*, undermining the literariness of what is written and returning to the oral tradition of what is spoken or sung.

This exploration continues in the work of contemporary western poets such as Jerome Rothenberg, Gary Snyder, Armand Schwerner, Anne Waldman and Anselm Hollo, translating from various cultures, reworking prose versions, writing from their own visions, opening our eyes to the wealth and variety of ethnic poetries - as rich and as potent as the range of world musics or tribal art.

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