

# *The Poetemics of Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal*

*Mudrooroo*

Poetry perhaps is whitefella business. In fact, I might declare that I don't know one Aboriginal poet; that is, if I discount those singer-songwriters such as Archie Roach, whose main mode of expression is lyrical, and thus are close kin to our traditional singers who sing about the cares and concerns of our communities and countries. If I am pressed, however, I might say that I know one Aboriginal person whose main mode of expression is in verse, and that is Lionel Fogarty. Of course, I am narrowing "poet" down to those whose main business is poetry, those who declare themselves poets first and foremost, often from a nineteenth century ideology of romanticism in which the person who considered himself a poet was driven by divine inspiration to versifying. The muse literally spoke (read: wrote) through him. I use the pronoun "him" deliberately here, for there were few women poets in the nineteenth century and naturally the muses were seen as female, similar to Jung's anima: the inner woman.

Oodgeroo, during my long friendship with her, never once described herself as a poet. She often said, when pressed, that she was an educationalist and that her job was to educate both white and black; and so, I believe that to wrench her verse away from her life and accepted role is to lose the message for the structure. It is to lose the polemics by comparison with persons who have described themselves as poets and are taken at this face value through the filtering apparatus of a theory of aesthetics which eschews the political — the polemical — for either the individual or universal truth-utterance. In effect poetry, this kind of poetry, is meant to be beyond the mundane utterance of the everyday, or to engage in a transformation of the everyday into

the universal as exemplified by Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Flower in the Crannied Wall" or to engage in a fetishisation of language — to translate it into Keats's "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever".

I doubt that this last quotation could be used in regard to the verse of Oodgeroo, and thus my use of the term "poetemics" in the title of my paper, which is to separate social verses such as she wrote and recited from the more "serious" business of poetics which exists in and for itself, often as a "thing of beauty", of an aesthetic form which makes me recall those languorous female muses as depicted in Victorian paintings. "Poetemics" is coined from "poetry" (verse) and "polemics" in order to stress that what is important in the poems of Oodgeroo is the message and any aesthetic pleasure we derive from them is of secondary value. In fact, such poetemic verse may have the opposite effect and may repel those in search of an aesthetic. In such verse there may be a deliberate repudiation of aesthetic concerns in order to produce an alienation effect, akin to the theories of Bertolt Brecht in his search for a Marxist dramatics:

True, profound, active application of alienation effects takes it for granted that society considers its condition to be historic and capable of improvement. True alienation effects are of a combative nature. (Willett, 277)

Such a repudiation of aesthetics and the resulting alienation may result in statements from critics such as this:

She is no poet, and her verse is not poetry in any true sense. It hasn't that serious commitment to formal rightness, that concern for making speech true under all circumstances, which distinguishes Buckley and Wright at their best. *The Dawn Is at Hand* belongs more rightly to the field of social protest . . . (Andrew Taylor, 1967)

Social protest is thus stated not to be the legitimate field of poetry, and though we might query this — especially in regard to poetry which stems from other than the European mainstream tradition — Oodgeroo's poetry from the first was labelled as "social protest" verse and was denied to be poetry. If this position is taken to be a negative judgement, then we are forced into attempts to rescue Oodgeroo for poetry, as may be seen in Cliff Watego's spirited defence at the Aboriginal Writers Conference in 1983 (*Aboriginal Writing Today*, 1985); but if we accept that Oodgeroo's

verse is poetemical, then it needs no such defence and we are forced to heed the message rather than to drag her verse into the mainstream poetic tradition with all its aesthetic values.

Again, labelling Oodgeroo's verse as merely "protest" does have a limiting effect, as I have shown in my previous examination of aspects of her work in *Writing From the Fringe* (1990). Oodgeroo's poems do have a wide range of subject matter and often the "final protest" is left for the reader to make. This is not to say that overt protest is not found in Oodgeroo's verse. In *My People*, her constantly-reprinted collection of verse up to 1970, there are poems which rightly may be termed "protest" verse, such as "United We Shall Win" or "Intolerance"; but these are balanced by other poems such as "Bora Ring" and "Community Rain Song". These seek to impart nostalgia for the past and show aspects of Aboriginal culture, or hope for the future, or even statements about life in general. Her subject matter is wide and to dismiss all of her poems as being simply "protest" is naive to say the least.

Poetry is often judged on (as any recourse to reviews of poetry will show) an assumed originality or, if not, then a playful use of traditional forms — such as the ballad metre — which are often parodied. In contrast to these types, Oodgeroo's poetry is conservative in its experimentation with verse structures. She usually uses such verse structures as are part of the cultural unconsciousness of Australia. Here I include both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people as belonging to this cultural unconsciousness, with the proviso that Aborigines are included depending on their proximity to mainstream Australian culture and what they have had placed within their minds in that socialising and often assimilationist process termed "primary or tertiary education". Oodgeroo is included in this cultural unconsciousness because she did undergo such a formal process of socialisation and assimilation, as described in her story "Repeat Exercise" (*Stradbroke Dreamtime*, 1972) and as shown in her later involvement with the Realist Writers Group in Brisbane (pointed out by Cliff Watego). Owing to the conservative nature of both of these institutions, when Oodgeroo began writing verse, she favoured the ballad metre with its necessity of rhyme, though on later occasions she did use a type of free verse, as may be found in such poems as "Jarri's Love Song". In regard to the cultural

unconsciousness of Australia, there is also the recourse to the structure of nursery rhymes (or children's play verses) in such poems as "No More Boomerang" which, rhythmically, appears to be based on "Here we go around the mulberry bush". I wish to stress here that we might not find a one-to-one correlation between a particular poem and a particular nursery or play rhyme. I doubt that the unconscious operates in this way, but more by way of allusion, or invocation. The formula, here being simplicity of rhythm and words, evokes simplicity of nursery or play rhymes which, in turn, evokes simplicity of a childhood state when such rhymes were heard or used. It is the invoking of this receptive state that prepares the mind for the reception of the message.

In poememics, with the urgency of getting the message across to as many readers as possible, this of necessity includes those who do not read poetry and have become familiar with a few of its structures in schools; thus there must be recourse to what the adult learnt as a child. This usage of traditional structures is very important, for it invokes unconscious associations which cause a state of emotional rapport which may then be inclined to make the reader accept the message. I believe that structure is just as important, at least in this psychological regard, as is content and it played a large part in the ideology of the leftist (read: communist) realist writers' usage of verse structures which were familiar to the workers. It seems that Oodgeroo, through her membership of this group, learnt and then adopted this strategy. For her, it proved very successful. Her collected volume of poetry, *My People*, has never been out of print since it was first published in 1970 and still outsells all other Australian poetry.

But when such a strategy of using supposedly transcendent structures of poetry is adopted, there is a price to be paid. As Ruth Doobov has stated, "It is to be expected that her reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* should write: 'At times the metres of her poems are trite, stemming from the worst type of nineteenth century hymns.' This is undoubtedly true" (Doobov 49). Thus Oodgeroo's verse is placed outside the canons of what, for some, constitutes good poetry. And if we expect our poetry to be experimental and "flash", we will accept these criticisms as well-founded. Rhyming metrical verse, especially when read silently from the page, can seem trite and contrived and can even seem

to unintentionally parody itself, at least under the eyes of those who are knowledgeable in poetic aesthetics. Simple rhyming schemes, as we find in much of Oodgeroo's verse, can make us grit our teeth, or smile disparagingly, or sink to condescension when reviewing them; but what we must not forget is that Oodgeroo never declared herself a poet's poet. She is writing, as she puts it in a 1977 interview with Jim Davidson in *Meanjin*, "... for her people"; and this must always be borne in mind, especially when we consider that most poetry published in Australia is completely ignored by much of the population. She, at the expense of contradiction in my paper, might be termed "a poet of the people" and what this means is that her poetry is easy to grasp and the messages come through loud and clear. The role of the educationalist is to use what tools are at hand and this she does.

Not only are the verse structures of Oodgeroo's poetry known to most Australians, but her language is also akin to Australian spoken language, although at times she does use an adaptation of Aboriginal English. The Australian English of Queensland is noted for its laconic flatness and lack of ornamentation and so is Aboriginal English. Thus, there is a noticeable absence of metaphor and simile in Oodgeroo's verse and an absence of "striking" images — which are supposed to be a feature of poetry. If this is so, how exactly does Oodgeroo's verse work? It works by the use of analogy and allusion, exactly as her verse structures seek echoes from the cultural unconsciousness. This is apparent in Oodgeroo's "No More Boomerang", one of her most popular poems which has been put to music on more than one occasion by Aboriginal musicians such as Coloured Stone. There are no similes in the short four-line rhyming stanzas, and the poem proceeds by invoking oppositions between the old ways of life of the Aboriginal people and the newly-arrived civilised ways. There is no attempt, except in the stanza on abstract art, to condemn outright; but it is left up to the reader, or listener, to draw out the conclusions. In its brevity and wit the poem is an example of Oodgeroo at her best. Again her style is proverbial, or aphoristic instead of image-based; and this laconic method, with its flat statements, is not what we are told good poetry is made from. In fact, her poem simply entitled "Verses" is a collection of aphorisms, or proverbs, which again is marked by no striking

images; thus: "appearance is the world's test. Brother, you're treated as you're dressed."

From my foregoing discussion of aspects of Oodgeroo's poetry, it should be apparent that it is impossible to use mainstream poetic criticism to aid our understanding of Oodgeroo's verse and that we are in the presence of a different type of poetics, one which I have labelled "poetemic" in that the message value far outweighs any aesthetic concerns. Thus to judge her verse by the usual mainstream methods of seeking striking images and the clever use of other poetic devices would lead to her dismissal as a "poet". She declared herself an "educationalist" and what must be taken into account in any discussion of her written work is her success — or lack of it — in getting her message across. By any means of measurement, she has been most successful, as the sales of her books attest, as the number of her poems which have been put to music attest, and the number of her lines which are quoted. As an educationalist and a poetemist, she has fulfilled her role, and moreover has introduced poetry to those who otherwise would not have read it. The Alice Springs singer Ted Egan sings in relation to the Aboriginal fighter Tjandamara that "The people will decide"; and in Oodgeroo's case, they have decided in spite of those critics who condemned her verse outright.

#### WORKS CITED

- Doobov, Ruth. "The New Dreamtime: Kath Walker in Australian Literature." *Australian Literary Studies* 6.1 (1973): 46-55.
- Egan, Ted, ed. *Egan Presents the Kimberley*. Cassette recording produced by the singer, no date.
- Meanjin*, Aboriginal Issue. 36.4 (1977).
- Narogin, Mudrooroo. *Writing from the Fringe*. Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990.
- Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal, Custodian of the Land Minjerriba (published under Kath Walker). *The Dawn Is at Hand*. Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *My People*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Stradbroke Dreamtime*. Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *We Are Going*. Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964.
- Taylor, Andrew. Review of the *Dawn is at Hand*. *Overland* 36 (1967): 44.
- Watego, Cliff. "Aboriginal Poetry and White Criticism." *Aboriginal Writing Today*. Ed. J. Davis and B. Hodge. Canberra: AIAS, 1985. 75-90.
- Willett, John, tr. & ed. *Brecht on Theatre*. London: Methuen, 1964.