

“MAKIN IT RIGHT” THROUGH THE POETRY OF ALF TAYLOR

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Abstract

Although Australian indigenous poetry is often overtly polemical and politically committed, any reading which analyses it as merely propaganda provides only a small window on it. By presenting the verse of Alf Taylor collected in *Singer Songwriter* (1992) and *Winds* (1994) and discussing it in the context of the wider social and cultural milieu of the author, my essay aims to show its thematic richness of indigenous poetic expression. Indigenous poets have, on the one hand, undertaken the responsibility to strive for social and political equality, as is generally believed, while on the other, they have produced powerful self-revelatory accounts of their own mental and emotional interior, which urges us to see their careers in a perspective much wider than that of social chroniclers and rebels.

Since the 1970, Australia has witnessed an upsurge in all fields of indigenous creative expression. Books such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Philip Noyce's 2002 film version of Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), which won the 2007 Francis Miles Award for the best Australian novel of the year, have had wide public appeal and made a significant impact on the Australian public. They all stem from the authors' heartfelt desire to illustrate the cataclysmic indigenous people's situation in Australia during and after the era of colonisation, and function in a variety of ways; among the most important being an explicit call to the white populace in Australia and worldwide to halt social injustice.

Given that poetry has attracted more indigenous Australians than any other mode of creative writing, this genre, too, has provided an important impetus for their cultural and political expression. By considering verse as a “verbal discourse in which message is dominant and the aesthetic function is subordinate,” as Mudrooroo Narrogin defines indigenous poetry in his book of criticism *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (1990), many poets (e.g. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Mudrooroo Narrogin, Lionel Fogarty, Romaine Moreton and Michael J. Smith among others) have adopted this medium as a means to express collective grievances against the forced socio-political agenda of more than two hundred years of colonisation, attacking government policies on the social ills within the Black Australian community (35). Although their provocative and empowering articulations of racial injustices have undermined the status quo and contributed to positive change in Australia, this is by no

means to suggest that Australian indigenous poetry can be dismissed as merely engaged writing. Whereas some poets indeed use their talent primarily as a political tool, others view this genre as a means of celebrating and preserving the beauty of nature; still others believe that poetry is an outlet for emotional release, concentrating on the exploration of more subjective topics of human existence. For the purposes of this discussion, the poetry of Alf Taylor will serve as the focus for my argument that Australian indigenous poetry deals with an array of subjects, depending on the author's apprehension of the scope of literature, and that lot of contemporary indigenous verse demonstrates the dual role of the author: that of critical commentator and that of private expressionist.

I met Alf Taylor, a Western Australian Nyoongah poet and writer, at the University of Western Australia in 2007, while he was working on the manuscript of his life story "God, the Devil and Me."¹ A gentle, warm, and very open-minded man, Taylor was always in the mood to tell a joke or spin a yarn. His writing, too, - the short fiction in particular - abounds with humour. "Without humour, I would have been dead [...]. Laughter was my sunlight and roses while locked in New Norcia," he explained to Anne Brewster in an interview for the 2007 issue of *Aboriginal History* (Brewster 169). Born in the late 1940s and growing up in the Spanish Benedictine Mission at New Norcia, Taylor represents an older generation of writers, members of the "Stolen Generation." Although he is reportedly one of the most productive contemporary indigenous authors and the only one to have published a substantial piece of writing about New Norcia, he has received only scant critical attention.² As a poet, Taylor has written two collections, both published by Magabala Books: *Singer Songwriter* (1992) and *Winds* (1994). The former was republished in *Rimfire: Poetry from Aboriginal Australia* (2000), together with *The Callused Stick of Wanting* and *Calling Thought* by Romaine Moreton and Michael J. Smith respectively. Taylor's short fiction is collected in *Long Time Now*, published by Magabala Books in 2001.³

Taylor seems to have turned to poetry for various reasons, including his desire to cope with the traumas of racial suppression and his painful upbringing: "Only love/ And/ The pen/ Can quell/ This flame/ That/ Burns within," he writes in the poem "This Flame" (*Winds* 39). For him, writing has become a kind of sustaining addiction, a way of establishing his personal and economic identity and above all, a necessary condition of existence. "Now I can talk about the life of the child, and I'm free of hurt, free of resentments, regrets. In other words ... bearing a grudge," Taylor reveals to Brewster in 2006 (170). Like many others, he was taken from his parents and put in a mission, where Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal language was considered "a mortal sin" (Brewster 166). Although writing has made him comfortable in the social and emotional spheres of ordinary life, and provided therapeutic value for him, it would be wrong to believe that he deals only with the experiences of being Aboriginal. Like his companions in *Rimfire*, Romaine Moreton and Michael J. Smith, Taylor has developed an array of

¹ Excerpts from this manuscript were published in the anthology of indigenous writing, *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember* (2001), and in the literary journal *Westerly* (2003 and 2005). The first *Westerly* excerpt was awarded the Patricia Hackett Prize (2003).

² The only critical essays worth mentioning have been written by Anne Brewster, who presented on Taylor's work also at the Universities of Tübingen and Maribor (in 2006).

³ The book is available in Spanish translation.

themes. By chronicling the ongoing suffering of his peoples and their capacity to survive in a hostile environment, his poems provide an invaluable insight into the socio-economic subordination of indigenous Australians. On the other hand, they examine the omnipresent themes of love, friendship, human joy and anguish. As Philip Morrissey notes in his introduction to *Winds*, "Taylor presents us with an Aboriginal subject [...] bound by a network of affective webs to family, lovers, places and strangers" (vii). In contrast with his short fiction, his verse is only rarely tinted with humour. Rather, his meditations are often pervaded by a spirit of sadness and sometimes even despair. This is particularly true of poems in which he deals with such typical factors of Aboriginal life as solitude, isolation and loss.

In terms of structure, because of Taylor's highly accessible mode of writing, his lines often seem pedestrian, particularly if assessed by strict rules of formalism. Admittedly, and as indigenous poets are often reprimanded, Taylor indeed seems to feel comfortable in the short line lyric with a meter of four stresses or fewer, or in free verse which often lacks fluidity.⁴ His poems are penned in a colloquial language, and his evenly measured end-rhyming lines are sometimes hardly virtuosic, as in the following excerpt:

Food will be bought
Cheap clothes sought.
Better put money here
gotta have a beer. ("Pension day," SS, 95)

Although Taylor's writing varies in accomplishment, his reputation as a poet is decidedly not that of a technical perfectionist. His verse is impressive because of the directness and sincerity that springs from his deeply felt personal experience. In his poems, he returns to his painful childhood and adolescence, to his hard-won struggles with alcohol and an attempted suicide, reviving memories of his tribe, parents, friends, youthful love, and heartfelt yearnings. Compared to Moreton's poetry, which is by her own admission very often received as "confronting and challenging," Taylor's poems are more lyrical, generated by his urge to reach a significant metamorphosis in his psyche, and as a means of reconciliation with his own past (Brewster 59). Generally speaking, they are also less poignant. As Taylor reveals in his interview, "the pencil is my weapon [...]. But I try to write from a neutral corner and go between the centre of that uneasiness, because I don't want my readers to be uncomfortable when they read" (Brewster 175). However, as this discussion will have shown, several of Taylor's poems stir strong feelings of guilt, shame and remorse in non-indigenous readers.

One would search in vain to find any kind of arrangement or logical sequence of poems in Taylor's collections. They follow each other like uncontrolled thoughts,

⁴ Many critics concur that a failure to achieve high standard English, symptomatic of much indigenous writing, has to be attributed to the limited formal education of these authors and their lack of confidence when entering a field that was previously monopolised by the white elite. Another aspect is political; for many indigenous Australians the English language is still synonymous with colonial authority, so they are reluctant to purify it of tribal and colloquial speech patterns. For more information see Igor Maver's »Contemporary 'New' Aboriginal Poetry in English,« in *Essays on Australian and Canadian Literature* and Adam Shoemaker's »The Poetry of Politics: Australian Aboriginal Verse« in his *Black Words, White Pages: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*.

moving back and forth from childhood to adulthood, and veering from public to private realms. Both collections start in *medias res*, bluntly exposing the brutalising effects of indigenous socio-economic subordination in Australia. *Singer Songwriter* opens with the poem "Black skin," an embittered voicing of the miseries suffered by the Black community. The poem's tone oscillates between despair and anger. A sense of hopelessness is achieved by the overwhelming presence of the colour black, which has a negative connotation in colour symbolism and is linked with death and sorrow. The yoking of rhyming companions (tomorrow/ sorrow, hope/ rope) establishes a feeling of farce:

Black skin see no tomorrow
black skin head in sorrow
black skin fight
black skin see no right.

Black skin cry
black skin die
black skin no hope
black skin grabs rope. ("Black Skin," SS, 79)

"People of the Park," the opening poem in *Winds*, begins and proceeds as an idyllic description of a tribal gathering "in the softness of the park/ [where] drinks/ circle the tribe/ laughter, music/" (1). It is not until the end of the poem that the poet overturns this one-dimensional cliché and surprises the reader with the heart-breaking claim:

People outside
The circle
Think
The people
Of the park
Have
Got no tomorrow. ("People of the Park," W, 1)

Several other poems included either in *Singer Songwriter* or *Winds* also deal with the impact of racial exclusion. In "Sniffin," for example, Taylor meditates on widespread drug use as a means "to get away/ from that shadow/ of pain" (SS, 107). Many indigenous people seek refuge in heavy drinking, as Taylor regretfully observes in poems such as "The trip," "Dole cheque," "A price," "Last ride," "Hopeless Case," "Ode to the Drunken Poet," "Horror," and others. It must be also because drinking was once an escape for the poet from thoughts of his cruel upbringing that he writes, "These are the people/ of no life/ and no hope" ("No hope," SS, 125), unreservedly taking the side of those who disapprove of this kind of escapism. That these poems are highly illustrative of the poet's own situation is also clearly evident from the following confession: "I was quite lucky to realize that alcohol does not solve any problems; it adds problems to problems" (Brewster 174-6). Similarly, Taylor lists the effects of drinking in "Gerbah": "The time he's forty body wrecked his life nearly done./ Dead brain cells and a burnt out liver,/ lays in a cold sweat and starts to shiver" (SS,

128). The poem proceeds as a deductively reasoned analysis, piling up arguments, exhortations and postulations, and ends with an appeal to the youngsters to learn and obtain education:

With no schoolin what have they got?
A dole cheque and a bottle, that's what.
Schoolin is a must for today
For the kids so that they can help pave the way. ("Gerbah," SS, 128)

Very much in the same vein regarding both theme and structure, Taylor reflects in "Leave us alone." Thematically, as in "Gerbah," the poet stresses the importance of obtaining education; structurally, both poems are written in six evenly measured four-line stanzas, with rhyming end-stressed syllables. In contrast to several of Taylor's poems characterised by pessimistic tonalities, and despite an undercurrent of satirical bitterness, "Leave us alone" offers an optimistic view and can be regarded as an exemplary instance of protest poetry, articulating an indictment of injustice and advocating change:

Challenge problems, not running away,
Forget about the booze and family fights,
Let's stand up as individuals and make it right. ("Leave us alone," SS, 134)

A rallying cry to his peoples to jointly strive for their rights, which underlies the recurrent themes of alcoholism, unemployment, poverty, and deaths in custody in Taylor's verse, is also heard in "We blackfellas." In this poem, structured as sustained argument and exposition, Taylor criticises the debilitating role of the media in their portrayal of indigenous peoples and concludes with the conviction: "We blackfellas must stand/ as one/ as the fight still goes on" (SS, 129).

Different in form, but not in content, is "Better tomorrow." By presenting a contrastive picture of a mother struggling to cope with difficult circumstances and escape the inevitable "alcoholic tomb," the poet works strategically to arouse the addressee (indigenous readers) towards action to change the situation: "Let's/ Get away/ From this/ Sadness and sorrow/ Let's look/ For a/ Better tomorrow" (W, 27).

In an accusatory and disconcertingly direct poem in clipped line lengths, "No names," Taylor reveals his deep concern about numerous deaths in custody. He is critical of non-indigenous Australians, who are aware of the shocking statistics, but do not react to them. Taylor hints at their unresponsiveness with a set of rhetorical questions underpinned with sardonic bitterness: "Who is/ to blame?/ Who is/ to blame?/ Lots of questions/ but no names (SS, 110).⁵ The poet's experimentation with language's syntactic markers, such as direct address to the reader, rhetorical questions, satirical antithesis, etc. to establish the point of view and to evoke emotional and cognitive states in the readers, ensures his verse maximum participatory effect. In "Why," for example, Taylor employs rhetorical questions to lay bare different aspects of contemporary cultural and economic inequality and to stir intense feelings of guilt and shame: "Why/ Is he/ Liv-

⁵ It has to be borne in mind that it was not until February 2008 that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd opened a new chapter in Australia's tortured relations with its indigenous peoples by apologising to them for the years of tyranny and suppression.

ing/ In this room/ Infested with/ Alcohol, drugs/ And pills/ [...] he just can't/ take it/ No more/ But why" (W, 20).

Taylor also deals with the theme of incarceration and deaths in custody in "Alone in the cell" (SS, 99), this time on a very personal level. The poem, taking a stanzaic pattern with regular end-syllable rhymes, is a first-person meditation on his experience of being imprisoned for not paying a parking fine. The reader learns of the author's despair, which led him to failed suicide by hanging himself in the cell. Despite its intimate character, the poem transcends the narrowness of the individual and takes on the quality of generic tragedy. "Locked Away" (W, 4), another poem generated out of his own experience of incarceration, is more lyrical ("Butterflies/ Are free/ Why/ Can't we .../ Over/ The distant/ Horizon/ Tomorrow/ greets us/ with sorrow"), but no less effective in exposing the treacherousness of contemporary cultural politics in Australia.

The Stolen Generation is touched upon particularly in "The mission" and "Fair skin boy," both published in *Singer Songwriter*. Whereas the former takes the form of five stanzas, each with four end-rhyming lines, the latter is a short clipped line lyric, with occasional end-syllable rhyme. Like Taylor's writing in general, the form of the poems issues not from an ideal aesthetic blueprint, but from the generative urgency of the author to address his own and his peoples' experiences honestly and movingly. "The mission" opens thus:

After prayers at night I go to bed
lying awake with memories in my head.
I can still see my mother kneeling on the ground
sobbing, Don't take my child, I want him around.
and closes:
I know one day I'll be free,
free from religion and free from rules.
Free to make up my own mind and free to be cool
but I know the damage has already been done
as I see myself lying drunk in the hot morning sun. (SS, 115)

Reading this poem is certainly not a passive activity; despite its technical weaknesses, it deeply engages non-indigenous readers and evokes feelings of moral indignation, anger and empathy tinged with guilt and remorse.

As if they were not written by the same author, poems such as "You are," "Moments of paradise," "Love," and "A love affair," celebrate love and devotion. Stemming either from the poet's joyful longing for his beloved or nostalgic heartache, and characterised by a delightful lightness of verse or elegiac tone, they allow Taylor to exchange his role as protest poet for that of intimate explorer of the conflicted labyrinth of heart. For example, the narrative lyric "You are," proceeds beautifully as a sequence of romantic metaphors that reveal the poet's playful state of mind ("You are a/ cool gentle breeze/ on a/ hot summer day./ You are/ a warm fire/ in the/ freezing month/ of May./ A warm sun/ on a/ cool morn./ a trickle/ of water/ to a/ parched throat/ ...") and leave the reader utterly unprepared for its dour conclusion: We are, in spite of everything, very lonely beings, or as Taylor says: "It is/ only me/ who could see/ in my mind" ("You are," SS, 80).

The same holds true for “The petal” (*SS*, 88), a short melancholy piece that celebrates nature. Inspired by its beauties, the poet reminds the reader of the inevitable passing of all living things (“Bruised and battered/ it starts/ to cry./ Caught in the brush/ it eventually/ dies”). On the other hand, the poem with the indicative title “Let’s,” shows the poet’s concern with the degradation of the environment. Displaying some typical characteristics of Taylor’s verse, such as irregularities in rhythm and rhyme, colloquialism, narrative diction, and his use of various syntactic devices, the latter takes the form of a series of imperatives that urge us to “look after/ mother earth/ [...], so our children/ won’t have to hide/ from the midday sun” (*SS*, 136). Like his poetry in general, the poem clearly demonstrates Taylor’s manner of writing, whereby the content determines the form, and not vice versa.

Apart from a few exceptions, Taylor relies heavily on his Aboriginality for texture, diction and rhythm so it is hard not to notice his indigenous sensibility even in poems that are acutely personal, like the love lyrics “Her name” and “The shadows,” for example. Intertwining joy with melancholy through variable refrains and metaphors, “Her name” reads:

The wind
 Brought
 Her name
 To me
 Silently
 Through the leaves

 The grass
 Tingled my body
 With her name
 As I
 Picked up the spear
 And began
 To hunt game (*W*, 32)

Hinting at injustices endured in the past, “The shadows” (*W*, 40) celebrates the healing power of love (You/ Will help/ To keep/ The shadows/ Of sorrow/ Nipping/ At the/ Pores/ Of my tomorrow).

A survey of Taylor’s poetic achievements can perhaps best be completed by noting “Makin it right,” where he writes:

I’ll try and make things right
 through writing and poetry
 I just might
 but we’ll all have to pull together.
 Never mind how far apart
 someone somewhere gotta make a start. (*SS*, 112)

Indeed, by articulating the multiple forms of trauma within the indigenous community, and advocating the community’s unconquerable spirit in the face of

adversity and loss, Taylor has had an important role in documenting and improving the situation of the indigenous minority in contemporary Australia. Beyond that, and although he is generally more concerned with theme and content than with the nuances of structure, language and texture necessary for complex artistic expression, the two collections discussed in this article break new ground in our appreciation of Australian indigenous verse. Writing out of the intense presence of his whole self and embracing a poetic mode that allows an apprehension of, and participation in the quality of his experience, Taylor has produced works that impress with their magnitude, compassion and power. As an intimate exploration of secret inner worlds, his poetry will continue to engage and delight our imagination; in its role of acute critical commentary, it is both challenging and compelling, ensuring maximum participatory effect not only by evoking strong feelings of culpability in non-indigenous Australian readers, but also by stimulating readers all over the world to draw parallels across national lines and consider Taylor's social and political critique in the context of their own national traumas.

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