

REASSESSING TRADITIONAL INUIT POETRY

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IN JULY OF 1745, Dr. Samuel Johnson, as virtual editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, published a "Greenland Ode," an Eskimo-language poem with an English translation (qtd. in Sherbo 575). This ode celebrates the birthday of King Christian of Denmark, and was the first Inuit poem to be available to the English-speaking world. In the two and a half centuries since the "Greenland Ode" appeared, more and far better Inuit poetry has been published, but it has received little scholarly attention. Only Rudy Wiebe's article in *Canadian Literature*, "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," and a handful of articles by the anthropologist Sven Frederiksen, make any attempt to examine this aspect of Inuit culture.

Canadian scholars and teachers have been curiously reluctant to approach Inuit poetry on any level, perhaps because they think they will not understand it. This paper will look at the history of Inuit poetry in English, and will examine a number of fairly typical poems in an effort to show that Inuit poems in English are not just anthropological enigmas, but are works that are accessible to anyone who brings curiosity and a little imagination to their reading of poetry.

Inuit song is immensely old, but it has only really been available to English-language readers in any quantity since 1925 when Diamond Jenness published *Songs of the Copper Eskimos* (Roberts and Jenness), an academic work with interlinear translations from the Inuinaqtung dialect. Jenness was not a poet, nor was he fluent in Inuktitut, and it is clear that he realized the limitations of his translation, yet many of the works are deeply moving and powerful. Vilhjalmur Stefansson made an attempt to popularize the works in 1929, and he arranged for a Canadian singer, Juliette Gaultier de la Verendrye, to sing them at Town Hall in New York. She performed against a backdrop of totem poles and aurora borealis, and although the *New York Times* reported that the songs were very well received, being "decidedly melodious and an entire novelty to the audience" ("Songs of the Copper Eskimos Given"), there was no sudden recognition of the joys of Inuit poetry on the part of the general reading public.

Knud Rasmussen's massive *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition*, with its extraordinary collection of songs and legends from across 5,000 miles of Arctic

coastline, appeared in ten volumes between 1928 and 1945. Rasmussen was not just an accomplished linguist, theologian and ethnographer, but was also an Inuit poet himself. In addition, he was highly photogenic, and perhaps because of his native background he attracted considerable attention from the press; but unfortunately Rasmussen died the year after returning from the expedition, leaving his work incomplete. After a brief popularity, the poetry he translated was ignored. The translations he produced are likely never to be rivalled, and he set the standard by which all subsequent translations and collections of Inuit poetry are measured, but English readers still had not acquired a taste for work that was ambiguously labelled "primitive" even by its promoters.

In recent years, traditional Inuit song has fared somewhat better. During the 1950s, Edmund Carpenter wrote an article for Marshall McLuhan's journal, *Explorations*, in which he drew upon the Jenness material; and he followed this with *Anerca*, a small volume of Rasmussen's translations, in 1959. Inuit poems were often included in collections of Indian poetry in the 1960s, and volumes of Inuit poetry were edited by Lewis in 1971, Houston in 1972, Lowenstein in 1973, and Hoffman in 1974. In 1976, Rasmussen's ten-volume *Report* was reprinted at prohibitive cost, and in 1981 John Robert Colombo edited *Poems of the Inuit*, a compilation of some of the best of the ethnographic collections. Colombo's meticulous and sensitive editing and his discussion of Inuit poetics now make it possible to introduce these works to students at the high-school or university level.

There has been a tendency for those writing about Inuit poetry to stress the magical, ritualistic, and musical aspects of the compositions, or to assure the readers that if the poems do not make any narrative or lineal sense that is because they are not intended to. The implication is that for Inuit poets, how a thing is said is more important than what is said. There is some truth in this assertion, but it is usually taken too far. The poems are songs and in many cases the music predominates, so that when it is removed or lost, what is left is sparse and repetitive. In many of the incantations, the meaning is deliberately obscured or key words were changed when the chants were sold or given to the collectors. Sometimes an anthropological knowledge of the culture is needed for the reader to be able to decode the embedded meaning and the obscure metaphors used by Inuit poets. However, many Inuit poems, possibly even the majority, are quite straightforward and can be read and understood with very little effort by English speakers.

RASMUSSEN IDENTIFIED four basic categories of Inuit poetry: songs of mood, hunting songs, charms, and songs of derision. These four categories are not mutually exclusive; it is possible for a hunting narrative to be combined with the philosophical musings of a mood poem, but identifying the dominant

thrust of the works makes it a little easier to understand them. The following four extracts from sample poems give some idea of what can be found in Inuit poetry.

The first, "Ptarmigan," is a mood poem. Mood poems are songs of reflection which do not involve a central story or action; they are like Imagist poems which try to give a visual impression which involves the perception of relationships. This particular example, by the poet Umanatsiaq, has an unexpected though typical twist:

On the top of a snowdrift
In the tundra
Stood a little ptarmigan

Its eyelids were red,
Its back was brown,
And right between its buttocks
Sat the sweetest little arse. (Lowenstein 51)

This poem has been the subject of considerable discussion among Danish scholars. Inuit poems are frequently very literal and it is all too easy to develop complex interpretations that cannot be justified. In the case of "Ptarmigan," it is best to concentrate on the almost photographic detail used to convey the mood in the poem.

The ptarmigan's brown back indicates that, despite the presence of a snowdrift, summer is finally on its way. The ptarmigan is an amusing little bird, and a fine harbinger of spring, and after a long, dark winter the sight of its back feathers turning from white to brown might very well produce one of those moments Wordsworth called "spots of time." It doesn't do to wax too lyrical, though; the poem might be better understood if you see Inuit smacking their lips over the last line. A ptarmigan's *itig* might more properly be translated into English as a "pope's nose" or a "parson's nose" rather than the cruder "arse" that is usually used. The *itig* on a ptarmigan is a sweet, literally sweet, oily morsel that is greatly appreciated by gourmets. Umanatsiaq was likely aiming a rock at the bird as he admired it and composed his song, just as William Carlos Williams reached for the plums with one hand and the pen with the other.

Charms and incantations are often fragmented, incomprehensible, or in magical language; they are similar to nonsense verse, sound poetry, or even concrete poetry, where the form the poem takes dominates its meaning. "Who Comes" is a classic; it is credited by Carpenter to Ohnainewk, who recited it on his death bed, but Colombo points out that it is a variation of a longer poem, "Against Sickness," known among the Greenland Eskimos (Colombo 113).

Who comes?
It is the hound of death approaching
Away!
Or I will harness you to my team. (Colombo 100)

This poem or chant is relatively simple; it follows the traditional dialogue or question/answer sequence of the song-duel or flyting; it makes reference to the dog-husband of the sea goddess Nuliajuk (also called Sedna), who fathered the people of this world, and it pivots on the use of dogs for transportation, a cultural practice not used extensively anywhere in the world except the Arctic. But a reader needn't know any of this to appreciate this little poem. When the hound of death comes for us, be it Cerberus or some domestic mutt of our own imagining, we would all like to be able to challenge him so boldly.

Hunting songs can be reflective but are more likely to be narrative and full of incident. Success in the hunt is a favourite theme of Inuit song and for Orpingalik it is his life. The great hunter had been seriously ill and composed the poem "My Breath" during a fit of despondency. In a widely quoted remark, he explained that he called the poem "My Breath" because "it is just as necessary for me to sing as it is to breathe" (Colombo 109). Internally, however, the poem reveals a strong emotional connection between hunting and sexuality. Orpingalik sees the polar bear's attack as a challenge to his manhood, claiming that the bear "really believed / He alone was a male," and the seal he recalls harpooning is also "an old and cunning male." In his depression, he wishes his wife would go to a better man who could be her refuge. He is also surprised at his own reaction to illness:

Knowest thou thyself?
 So little thou knowest of thyself!
 While dawn gives place to dawn,
 And spring is upon the village. (Colombo 39)

Derisive songs are satiric and are often monologues or dialogues; they are like Old English flyting poems in which verbal assault is part of the intellectual game. Netsit's song, "Men's Impotence," links hunting and sexuality in a derisive song. The full title, given in the literal translation Rasmussen generally provided of his interpretations, is "A Song of Men's Impotence and the Beasts They Hunted." In "Men's Impotence" we meet a hunter who cannot function at all:

Perhaps — well
 It may not matter!
 Perhaps — well.
 I sing merely of him,
 "The Boiling One,"
 Who sat, fearful, his mouth fast closed,
 Among women. (Colombo 31)

He is isolated, silent, not just fearful but frightful, a danger to others. His face is described in terms of male hunting implements, a mouth bent like a kayak rib, eyes shaped like horn cut into leisters, his mouth is closed fast and his eyes bode ill. Like

Wiebe's Almighty Voice, he is described as having a face like an axe. The man who cannot hunt becomes a danger to his fellows, a man who cannot sing becomes a danger to himself, and by implication, a man who cannot love women will hate them.

IT IS EVIDENT even in the four sample poems just discussed that there are thematic links between various types of Inuit poetry. The act of composition is also a major subject of Inuit poetry and is also linked to hunting. Akjartok, like Orpingalik, feels that to breathe is to sing and to sing is to recall the hunt. The poets usually recall killing male animals, which are larger and a real challenge to their prowess. Here is a typical example:

I call forth the song
I draw a deep breath
My breast breathes heavily
As I call forth the song.

I hear of distant villages
And their miserable catch
And draw a deep breath
As I call forth the song.

I forget altogether
The heavy breathing of my breast
When I call to mind the olden days
When I had strength enough
To cut up mighty bulls
I call forth the song.

While the sun was on his upward way
Across the sky
A song I call forth
As I draw a deep breath. (Colombo 44)

Sometimes, of course, the song does not come forth, just as sometimes the real refuses to surface or the fish refuses to take the hook. Ikinikik sings

I have only my song
Though it too is slipping from me. (Colombo 83)

Ivaluardjuk's lament is that

. . . songs
Call for strength
And I seek after words. (Colombo 43)

Piuvkaq observed that it is

A wonderful occupation
Making songs!
But all too often they
Are failures. (Colombo 36)

In another poem he admits that he prefers fist fighting to singing because

Words melt away
Like hills in fog. (Colombo 41)

Apparently, breaking someone's nose occasionally produces more lasting satisfaction than composing a poem does.

Although these works frequently explore man's sense of fragility and insecurity, images of the land in Inuit poetry provide a sense of stability and continuity. The poet may be overwhelmed by the power of nature, he may not survive his encounters with it, but the land is always there. Kaneyioq begins his chant:

My thoughts went constantly
To the great land
My thoughts went constantly. (Colombo 100)

Padloq's magic charm, to be recited when in sudden danger of death, says:

You earth
Our great earth
See, oh see
All those heaps
Of bleached bones. (Colombo 66)

Uvavnuk's trance song also depicts man as small and insignificant in his confrontation with the land:

The Great Sea
Has set me adrift
It moves me as the weed in the river
Earth and the great weather
Move me
And move my inward parts with joy. (Colombo 21)

Uvavnuk might just as easily have sung Keats's

... on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Til Love and Fame to nothingness do sink. (Abrams 1830)

Padloq, too, would have given a nod of recognition to Blake's

Oh Earth, O Earth, return
Arise from out the dewey grass. (Abrams 1327)

Like Wordsworth, whose mountain strode after him “with purpose of its own” (Abrams 1458), Uvunuaq, too, sees the land as reflecting her inner turmoil. When she heard that her son had killed a man, she sang

Earth became like a mountain with pointed peak
And I stood on the awl-like pinnacle
And faltered
And fell. (Colombo 51)

Birney’s bushed trapper was not the first Canadian to feel the great flint come singing into his heart.

Death is a frequent theme in Inuit poetry, for obvious reasons, but even this is handled much as it is in some non-Inuit works. Netsit’s “Dead Man’s Song” and Paulinaq’s “Song of Aijut After his Death” both explore fear of death and a simultaneous longing to escape life. Like Archibald Lampman, they imagine what it would be like, but the Inuit composers use stock phrases from the oral tradition and impart their own particular understanding of the experience. Netsit sings:

I am filled with joy
When the day peacefully dawns
Up over the heavens. (Colombo 96)

Paulinaq similarly sings

I am filled with joy
When the big sun up there
Rises up over the vault of the sky. (Colombo 98)

Both tell of feeling the maggots in the hollows of the collarbone, and of being buried in a snow-hut. Paulinaq, however, projects his fears onto the hunter Aijut and does not have the same need as Netsit to end with a consolation or positive statement. He ends as a corpse buried in the igloo:

And I felt horror
There on the freshwater ice
And I felt horror
When from the great sky out there
Came the loud cracking of the ice. (Colombo 99)

By dwelling on the horrors of death and his failure to enjoy life, Netsit manages to revive his interest in the new day:

Now I am filled with joy
For every time a dawn
Makes white the sky of night,

For every time the sun goes up
Over the heavens. (Colombo 97)

Dawn seems to be a dangerous time for Inuit poets — it can mark the new day, and renewal, but sometimes Nauliajuk's dog husband is referred to as the "hound of dawn" as well as the "hound of death" (Colombo 113), so it has ambiguous implications. Netsit's version of the vision of death, with its question/answer sequence, feels more complete, a true inner-debate, an internal song duel.

The famous satiric song duels, in their purest forms, were a remarkable judicial and cultural achievement but very few examples have survived intact. Perhaps it was because every duel had a winner and a loser and nobody wanted to take the time to memorize a losing song. The satiric songs that have been transcribed and translated into English are often directed against the self. In the Ammassalik Eskimo "Song of an Old Man About His Wife," the poet reflects on the fact that his wife's face, wrinkled and blotched with age, is a mirror of his own, and they are neither of them young and handsome anymore (Lewis 84). In the traditional "Song of Longing" the poet mocks his own infatuation with other men's wives (Colombo 29). In "The Old Woman's Song," the poet mocks her own lost youth and appeal, and sings:

Virtue is only to be found in old women
And therefore it is my sorrow
Oh, I am so sad
Because I am old. (Colombo 48)

The ability to laugh at one's own sexual intemperance, and to puncture one's own pretentiousness, is something the Inuit poets share with a number of contemporary Canadian poets. Al Purdy, who travelled with the people of Baffin, is one who comes immediately to mind. The composer of "The Old Man's Song," like Purdy, makes fun of his own intellectual musings:

I have grown old
I have lived much
Many things I understand
But four riddles I cannot solve

The sun's origin
The moon's nature
The minds of women
And why people have so many lice. (Colombo 48)

Of course, Inuit poets frequently mean the opposite of what they say, and when they list all the things they cannot do they are sometimes simply making sure that people know that they are, in fact, highly accomplished men and women who are simply too polite to brag.

COMPARING INUIT POETRY to English poetry stresses the universal nature of the works; the world inhabited by the Thule people is far away in time and space, but they were expressing their responses to the human condition in ways that have been used by many other cultures in many other times. Poems about birth, work, sex, and death are bound to touch chords in everyone.

It is well to remember, though, that there is one major difference between the contemporary Canadian poetic tradition and that of the traditional Inuit. Inuit believed in the practical application of poetry. While our own poets composed verses describing their feelings about the weather, Inuit poets believed that if they got the words of their poem just right, they could actually affect the weather. If there is any one cultural element that is foreign to English-language readers, it is this. Our nearest equivalent would be a belief in the efficacy of prayer. Bad weather was more than just an inconvenience to Inuit, and the song that could improve it was often all that stood between life and death. Such a song had as much practical importance as a sharp knife or an antibiotic. When Aua sang "This is blood that flowed from a piece of wood. Dry it up!" (Colombo 59), he believed that the words, and the words alone, could actually stop a wound from bleeding.

Such a belief in the power of words must produce poems of tremendous endurance. A frequently quoted explanation comes from the Inuit explorer and poet Knud Rasmussen:

These works don't arrive like fragile orchids from the hot houses of professional poets; they have flowered like rough, weather beaten saxifrage which has taken root on rock. And they ought to matter to us. For do we not hear through them something that reminds us of the original features of our own old songs — the same teasing humour, the same quiet melancholia — and sometimes in glimpses, a simple but grandiose pathos which grips us by virtue of its immediacy. (qtd. in Lowenstein 109)

It was this sense of our own tradition that Dr. Johnson recognized when he published the "Greenland Ode," and it is this, too, that Rudy Wiebe and John Robert Colombo hope we will all recognize.

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