

Oral Tradition, 18/2 (2003): 187-188

Thoughts on Oral Tradition

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It is easier, I think, to say what oral tradition can be rather than what it is. I have been working in the field of Celtic literature for a dozen or so years, and have been moving in and out of more or less oral genres from the start. If, as I do, you are basically working with texts, it is of course the “more or less” that shapes one’s sense of orality, and mine has shifted with each new project.

With medieval Welsh prose, for example, I was quickly irritated with critics who tried to rationalize the inconsistencies of plot and motivation in the tightly-packed, layered stories of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Why anyone should want to know where the Mysterious Claw came from, much less worry about why it had to snatch a newborn colt every May Eve was beyond me. What mattered was that it did. As a critical stance this doubtless leaves much to be desired, but even a passive acceptance of how things are can be a way of learning a language, of absorbing patterns and structures. With its elliptical references to unknown heroes and events, the *Mabinogi* taught me that stories existed “out there” beyond the text, and that it was best not to be too literal-minded in trying to track them down. Early Welsh poetry, especially the haunting runs of three-lined *englynion*, taught me to listen to the cumulative effect of rhyme and rhythm, to try to read the texts as a score.

Working with the ballads of nineteenth-century Brittany, a new element appeared: place. The Breton *gwerziou* are rooted in the local landscape—their stories are connected to real churches, rocks, crossroads. Here again the extratextual, the dimension beyond the song itself, was crucial: the song both represented it, and opened a door into it. I became especially interested in the shorter, more elliptical texts: the less they said, the greater the fascination. Barre Toelken’s work has been a great inspiration here: his studies of the connotative and metaphorical nature of song idiom, and his emphasis on the importance of an active, engaged audience, have opened up all kinds of possibilities in the field. Gerald Porter and I have recently pursued these ideas in an exploration of “fragments” in

traditional song, drawing on ballads, lyrics, blues, work songs, and gypsy songs to explore the many ways that supposedly “degenerate” or incomplete pieces convey meaning. This work, of course, brings the study of folk song towards notions of traditional referentiality explored by John Foley and others in the context of epic.

My current interest is in the eighteenth century, in the “discoverers” of oral tradition, those who first shaped the debate about the nature of orality. The stonemason Iolo Morganwg, prime reviver (and canny reinventor) of lost traditions in Wales, devised an extraordinarily didactic—but also bravely democratic—form of orality, the effects of which can still be felt not only in the National Eisteddfod but in poetry-reciting competitions in Welsh villages to this day. For Iolo, safeguarding ancient truths was a public affair: “Bardic Tradition walks in open day and beaten tracks—in the eye of light, as its own language emphatically has it” (Williams 1794:II, 222).

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