

# The Transmission of Oral Memory: Homeric Influences on Australian Literary Writing

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Australia (*Terra Australis*), being an area of about 7.7 million square kilometres (about 58 times larger than Greece), is historically a self-governing young nation, having achieved federation of its States (previously British colonies) as recently as 1901.<sup>1</sup> Yet its 20.1 million residents<sup>2</sup> comprise the most multicultural and multilingual society in the world after Israel, being of over 200 different ancestries<sup>3</sup> and speaking more than 214 languages, including at least 55 Australian indigenous languages.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite its relative youth, its geographic location and its small population, it has developed a dynamic and internationally respected literature noted for its receptivity and openness to international intellectual and artistic movements, trends and ideas.

Australian literature during its life of around 200 years, having developed in a constantly and increasingly multi-ethnic society (especially since the middle of the twentieth century) has been enriched by diverse historical, mythological, cultural and other elements and, consequently, demonstrates influences deriving from many cultures of the world. The fruit of these influences, combined with the individual writers' education

<sup>1</sup> Ian McAllister [et al], *Australian Political Facts* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (*Population Clock*, Canberra, [<http://www.abs.gov.au>]) the estimated resident population of Australia on 14 August 2004 was 20,162,467.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2015 0 2001 Census Reveals Australians' Cultural Diversity*, Canberra, 17/6/2002 [<http://www.abs.gov.au>].

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *1996 Census Dictionary Section One 1996 Census Classifications (Language Spoken at Home – LANP)*, Canberra, 3/7/1996 (updated 9/3/2001) [<http://www.abs.gov.au>] and *Year Book Australia 2003: Population Languages*, [Canberra], 24/1/2003 [<http://www.abs.gov.au>].

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and interests, is a national literature which incorporates and reflects Roman, Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Old Germanic, Old Celtic, Aboriginal, Chinese, Japanese, Scandinavian and other cultures. In addition, the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu and other religions, as well as many national literatures, especially Western ones, leave their own particular mark on this body of literature. One of the cultures and literatures which has become an important influence upon Australian literature from its outset is that of Greece. Within this wide-ranging area of influence from Greece, a significant and multifaceted source of inspiration is that of Homer and his epic poetry.

Of course, the Homeric influence projected in Australian literature is not as extensive as that encountered in many European literatures, naturally after all for a continent so far removed in both time and place from Homeric times, but those existing make their appearance in interesting ways and forms, in prose, poetry and drama, and actually in the writings of both less known as well as established writers.

The exponents of Australian literature who display Homeric reflections and influences in their creative works have gained this knowledge through various channels, such as their formal education, personal study especially of Western literature (in particular of British literature which has a demonstratively age-old contact and appreciation of all aspects of Homer's works), as well as through travels to and periods of residence in Greece – something which a number of Australian writers have pursued and experienced.

Regarding the role of formal education in relation to Homer, the following should be noted.

In the Australian education system, the study of Homer and the Homeric works – of course, of different aspects and for different purposes – is possible on all three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary.

On the primary level, Homer's stories, such as the adventures of Odysseus and the tale of the Trojan horse appear as an optional set of narratives and resources which the teacher may, and often does, use in Years two to six.

On the secondary level, the student can study Homer in three areas: a) Ancient History in the Senior School classes 11 and 12, covering subject areas such as women in Homeric society, mythology, the Trojan treasure and so on, b) Literature, as an optional topic for classes 7-10 studying epic

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poetry as well as c) Study of Societies (including ancient societies) where Homer is offered, also on an optional basis for Years 11 and 12.

On the tertiary level, units on Homer and Homeric studies, or incorporating them in wider subject areas, are offered by a number of universities in all Australian States in the fields of classical literature, European cultures, classical heritage, ancient history and classical civilisations, archaeology of Ancient Greece, mythology etc.

In Australian literature overall, Homeric reflections and influences take a wide range of forms and appearances, according, of course, to the particular topic which the writer is dealing with. While in the limited time available for this paper it is not possible to deal in detail with all of them, there should be mentioned that Homeric works, as a source of inspiration, appear as history, mythology, folk tradition and so on, spanning from entire poems and short stories, to piquant points and references in poetry, prose and drama, and all the way to mystical allusions and descriptive analogies, metaphors, similes, allegories etc.

Of the two great works of Homer, the one which – as far as I have been able to ascertain through my research – is most frequently reflected in Australian literary works, or whose theme is more frequently used as a tool of literary creation, is the *Odyssey*. In particular, the themes of Ithaca and Odysseus' final return to his home are especially attractive to Australian writers. However, it is not surprising that the story of Odysseus strikes a chord with Australians and fits so well with the Australian way of life, because Australia is a nation of people who have come, or whose forebears have come, across the oceans to settle in this country. Many others, born here, have travelled widely overseas and finally returned to Australia. For them, Australia is their own personal Ithaca. In fact, the prize-winning author Christina Stead in her novel *For Love Alone* calls Australia "a great Ithaca"<sup>5</sup> for these two reasons, and states pointedly that "each Australian is a Ulysses".<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Ithaca for many Australians has become a symbol for the place they have come from and wish to return to. Yet this may be Australia as a nation or, because Australia is such a vast country and encompasses such a variety of landscapes, environments and climatic conditions (from snow-covered Alps to tropical rainforests to deserts), it may represent simply the city or rural area within Australia a person comes from.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Stead, *For Love Alone* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1966), p. 2. This novel was first published in England in 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Stead, *For Love Alone*, p. 222.

Conversely, while the *Iliad* has still been a source of inspiration for poets, prose writers and dramatists, the frequency with which it appears is less than that of the *Odyssey*. One reason for this could possibly be that a tale based on individual heroes is not really applicable to today's modern warfare, where soldiers fight not other individuals but machines of terrifying destructive power which kill them in the hundreds, even thousands. In this situation, the individual martial hero becomes obsolete.<sup>7</sup> But in earlier times this was not so, for the deeds of Australian soldiers in World War I, especially at the battlefields of Gallipoli (close to ancient Troy), inspired an outburst of literary writing in which the Australian soldiers embodied characteristics of Homeric heroes, in comparison to the lesser men in the enemy armies.<sup>8</sup>

The resonance of Homer's presence is not a modern phenomenon in the history of Australian literature. On the contrary, references to Homeric themes and characters appear quite early in this literature, the earliest I have found being a poem published in 1843. This poem, entitled "Andromache's Lament in Epirus, beside the Tomb of Hector", was written by a young boy named John Dennistoun Wood. Although he was only thirteen years of age at the time, this is a good, smooth work with genuine feeling, the quality such that it gained him a prize at Edinburgh Academy. It was subsequently published in *The South Briton: Or, Tasmanian Literary Journal*<sup>9</sup> and republished in the *Launceston Advertiser*.<sup>10</sup>

Here it should be noted that in this early stage in the development of Australia, although some books of literature had been published, the main forum for poetry was that provided by newspapers, with almost every newspaper having at least some poetic contribution in each issue.

A later poem but still quite early (1932) also draws on the *Iliad*, but in a startlingly different way. Mary Gilmore's work "Australia", as can be understood from its title, deals with the environment and indigenous people of this continent, and Troy is brought into it as a civilisation of international renown, but used as a measure of time. The poet reveals that Aborigines were here when "Troy rose and fell", and indeed the old Homeric heroes of Greece's ancient times are quite recent in comparison

<sup>7</sup> See also Robin Gerster, "War Literature, 1890–1980", in Laurie Hergenhan (gen. ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 337–338.

<sup>8</sup> Gerster, "War Literature", p. 338.

<sup>9</sup> Vol. I, No. 1 (1843): pp 24–25.

<sup>10</sup> 13 April 1843, p. 4.

with the historical span of Australia's indigenous people, whose history extends back at least forty thousand years.<sup>11</sup>

While Gilmore skilfully shifts the focus of the Homeric works from the traditional lands of Greece and Troy to her homeland Australia, other Australian writers, also skilfully use the theme of the *Odyssey* as a journey, a personal Odyssey, whether it is the actual physical travels of a writer or, more symbolically, the physical and spiritual journey through life from birth to death.<sup>12</sup>

However, one much respected poet, the professor A. D. Hope, approaches the *Odyssey* from a completely different perspective. To Hope, in his sensitively written poem "End of a Journey", Odysseus does not look back on his travels and adventures with a sense of achievement, but on the contrary his ultimate realisation is that his whole heroic endeavour – and indeed his life – has been pointless.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, a particularly interesting point which I have observed is that the brutality and slaughter which takes place in the *Iliad* between individuals has become the source of inspiration for a number of works which strongly convey an anti-war message.<sup>14</sup> A particular example of this is the short story "Ulysses or, the Scent of the Fox" (1999)<sup>15</sup> by the renowned poet and prose writer David Malouf, which uses the Trojan War as "a modern metaphor for ultimate carnage and waste". Interestingly, in its turn, this prose piece has inspired the dramatic poem "After the First Great War, c. 1270–1260 BC" by David Rowbotham, similarly an anti-war work, and written in epic form.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mary Gilmore, "Australia", in Ken Goodwin and Alan Lawson (eds), *The MacMillan Anthology of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: The MacMillan Company of Australia, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> See among others Gillian Bouras, *A Fair Exchange* (Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1991), pp. 137–138, p. 143, pp. 231–232; David Rowbotham, "Michael", *New and Selected Poems, 1945–1993* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> R. F. Brissenden, "Art and the Academy: The Achievement of A. D. Hope", in Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 414.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, this does not imply at all that anti-war messages have not been conveyed by Greek literary works or writers. On the contrary, one encounters plenty of them, both in Ancient and Modern Greek literature, such as in the Ancient Greek comedies *Lysistrata*, *Archarmians*, and *Ecclestazusae* (Women in Parliament) brought out by Aristophanes in 411, 425 and 392 or 389 BC respectively; in Euripides' tragedy *The Trojan Women* produced in 415 BC; in the poem "Astyanax" (1Z) in the collection *Mythistorima* by George Seferis; *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis, and others.

<sup>15</sup> David Malouf, "Ulysses or, the Scent of the Fox", *Untold Tales* (Sydney: Paper Bark Press, 1999), pp. 47–58.

<sup>16</sup> David Rowbotham, "After the First Great War, c. 1270–1260 BC", *Southerly* (Sydney), Vol. 61, No. 3 (2001), pp. 59–63.

In the same vein, the poet Diane Fahey in a number of poems in her collection *Listening to a Far Sea* (1998) draws on the works and characters of Homer to expose the violence underlying the myth of the hero.<sup>17</sup>

So far in this paper, the emphasis has been on male heroes. But Australian writers have dealt with Homer's female characters, as well. The two who have attracted the most interest are Helen and Penelope, and while Helen is described as exquisitely beautiful but with no reference to any intelligence, Penelope is portrayed as not only enduringly faithful but also as wily and clever.<sup>18</sup>

Another aspect of Australian literature is that some writers prove to have the ability to break the boundaries of the traditional interpretations of Homeric works, and rather than dealing with them as serious subjects they interpret them with originality, from a humorous point of view.<sup>19</sup> There are quite a number of examples of this, but one which stands out particularly is "The Ballad of Dan<sup>20</sup> Homer", again by A. D. Hope.<sup>21</sup> Cleverly, Hope writes as if he is Homer himself. In this way, the Australian poet resorts to the first person narrative, utilising a literary device which lends intimacy and credibility to the subject. On the other hand, using very colloquial Australian language he pokes fun at the amorous exploits of Zeus. The result is a twelve-stanza poem in the form of a ballad which is witty, irreverent and amusing.

However, although all the examples mentioned above reveal direct influence of the two epic poems by Homer on Australian literary writings, Australian writers exhibit in their works indirect influence, as well. An indicative, but also interesting, case of the latter is that of the writer Ernestine Hill, who in her classic account of travels in the outback of Australia – *The Great Australian Loneliness* – makes two such references,

<sup>17</sup> For poems on Homeric themes in Diane Fahey's collection *Listening to a Far Sea* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1998), see pages 20, 21, 22, 38, 84, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Indicatively see, for Helen, Kenneth Slessor, "Eve – of Ottawa" (stanza 2), in Dennis Haskell and Geoffrey Dutton (eds.), *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994), p. 237, and for Penelope, A. B. Palma, "Time", *Stones in Summer* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1981), p. 118; Gillian Bouras, *A Fair Exchange*, p. 137, and James McAuley, "The Muse" (stanza 3), *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson (imprint edition), 1994), pp. 34–35.

<sup>19</sup> See among other works the poems by John Manifold, "The Sirens", and Andrew Taylor's "Whistling in the Dark", in R. F. Brissenden and Philip Grundy's selection *The Oxford Book of Australian Light Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 56 and pp. 133–134 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> The term "Dan" (from Latin "dominus") was an Old English title of honour, equivalent to "master" or "sir", as, for example, Dan Chaucer, Dan Cupid etc. (See also *The Macquarie Dictionary*, Dee Why, NSW: Macquarie Library, 1985 (rev. ed.), p. 462.

<sup>21</sup> A. D. Hope, "The Ballad of Dan Homer", in Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann (eds), *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1991), pp. 98–99.

one to the Spartan queen Helen who was kidnapped by Paris and another to the Trojan priest Laocoön.

With regard to Helen, Ernestine Hill – referring to the colourful multi-racial blend of pre-1940 Darwin, and utilising the British playwright Christopher Marlowe’s famous lines “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” in his *Doctor Faustus* (1588), Act 5, Scene 1 – expresses her admiration for, among other characters in Darwin’s population of the time, the “grave Doric beauties, their fair hair parted above the brow that launched a thousand ships”.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to Laocoön, the writer – drawing now on Virgil’s reference to the strangulation by a snake as punishment of the priest who predicted the fall of Troy should the Trojans make the fatal mistake to bring the Wooden Horse into the town<sup>23</sup> – describes the funeral procession of an Aborigine in tropical Darwin, where the other members of his tribe, in dancing, re-enact the dead man’s virtues, achievements and struggles in life, and compares him to “a Laocoön in living bronze”.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, beyond all the Homeric influence we have seen in Australian literature, the Homeric presence is still also obvious in other artistic and educational fields of endeavour in Australia today.

For example, in the arts, January 2004 witnessed in Melbourne the world premiere of the modern rock opera *Paris*, based on the ancient legend of Troy. In the cinema, 2004 saw the release in Australia of the hugely successful production *Troy*, which broke box office records. Similarly, in academia, an international conference on Homer was organised by the University of Melbourne in July 2002, with expert participants from Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. Likewise, Homer is still the topic of academic theses at a number of Australian universities.

In conclusion, it is without a doubt a great credit to the genius of Homer that, despite the fact that in multi-ethnic Australia the educational and cultural background of its people embraces so much more than Classical Greece alone, his works endure in this country, and his influence on Australian literature is still very apparent.

<sup>22</sup> Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson (imprint edition), 1940), p. 137

<sup>23</sup> P. Vergilius Maro, *Aeneis*, vol. II (Michael I. Saliveros Library of Greek and Latin Writers and Poets), Athens: M. I. Saliveros, n.d., lines 212-224 (Otto Güthling standard edition).

<sup>24</sup> Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, p. 194.

At the same time it is also a credit to Australian writers that they have produced both prose, poetic and dramatic works – some composed even more than several decades ago – in which their interpretation of Homer is amazingly innovative and contemporary. These particular works reflect, through the influence of Homeric themes and characters, the pulse, the agonies and the feelings of today. From this point of view, and through the eyes of many Australian writers, the Homeric presence in Australian literature is both relevant, inspirational and extremely modern.

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