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THE LITERATURE OF THE OMAHA

by

Lawrence J. Evers

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PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I Introduction	1
II Nineteenth Century Omaha Culture: A Context	10
III Omaha Literature Collected in the Omaha Tribe	44
IV Omaha Literature Collected in the Ojigiha Tribe	101
V Omaha Literature Today	168
VI Conclusion	180
BIBLIOGRAPHY	181
APPENDIX	191

PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Serious academic consideration of Native American literatures has been virtually non-existent in English and American literature departments. The assumption of these departments presumably is that Native American material receives adequate treatment within Anthropology departments. While the attention which the literature receives there yields valuable results, the science of anthropology is not a science of literature.¹

This exclusion of a set of aesthetically rich literatures from those literature classes labelled "American" yields a special irony. Indeed, whether the classes are "English" or "American" we select materials almost exclusively from the British-American literary tradition.

To be sure, the long uneasy summers of the sixties sent us from our television sets to have another look at James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and our forgotten subscription to the Negro digest. And, from these authors, on to a recognition of the real and substantial links Black American literature has maintained

¹Frederick Dockstader's review of dissertations concerning American Indians written from 1890-1955 in the United States, Canada and Mexico in all academic fields indicates that less than fifty of some 3,684 entries deal with Native American literature or Native Americans in American literature. See The American Indian in Graduate Studies: A Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations, contributions from the Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation Vol. 15 (New York: Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1957). This ratio has not changed over the last fifteen years.

with the African literary heritage. But American Indians by and large didn't collect in the urban pools that generated the vital energy of the Black movement. They gathered, rather, in those residual pools created by the Congress and maintained by the War Department during the nineteenth century where any bricks that got thrown went through windows that didn't have glass anyway, and where the largest concentration of vital energy seemed to collect in the incessant weekly handgame songs and annual pow-wows. Those of us close enough to hear a bit of this unfamiliar sound were able to focus on its regularity and file it with the familiar presence of the summer cicadas and the buzzing of neon lights. When new louder Indian voices rise, they reach us back in front of our televisions or in the office with the prison memoirs and trial records of the leaders of the Black movement secure in the memory that no matter how many shots were fired in Chicago or Detroit, Jackson or Attica, our living rooms had proved well out of range. If we survived Omaha in the summer of '69, how could we be threatened by Gordon in '72?

From "English" classes to Gordon. I set out simply to say that by their very appellation those college and university departments in which we teach literature are ethnocentric in the most pejorative sense. We are concerned with the literary achievement of one tradition whose limits can be traced in any "good" anthology at the bookstore. Rarely do we offer students the opportunity to engage themselves in any alternative literary tradition, much less those literary traditions which are natively American and not "English." (Rarely to almost never, if we reduce our focus from Native American to Native Nebraskan.)

Homer and Hesiod firmly in mind, we have, of course, included "oral" literatures within our theoretical sphere of activity. Wellek and Warren suggest that "one of the objections to 'literature' is its suggestion (in its etymology from litera) of limitation to written or printed literature; for clearly any coherent conception must include 'oral literature.'"² Moreover, we have conferenced and urged the inclusion of a variety of cultural mythoi on all levels of literary training.³ But in practice we make gestures to this concept of cultural pluralism in the "English" class and avoid serious and sustained encounters with the material. We choose a work by an Anglo author which has an "Indian" character or deals with an "Indian" theme. We include a text which anthologizes fragments of Native American ritual poetry, or we use Native American biographies.⁴ Even these minimal inclusions are cause for some joy, but where do Native American literatures receive the extended and serious treatment we afford British and American literatures?

The academic community has assigned Native American literary materials to Anthropology departments. This assignment has given the

²Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 22.

³See, for example, Paul A. Olson, ed., The Uses of Myth: Papers Relating to the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 1966 (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968), especially pp. 29-31.

⁴Robert F. Sayre describes his use of biography in "Vision and Experience in Black Elk Speaks," College English, 32, no. 5 (February, 1971), pp. 509-535. For a very complete list of work in this genre see Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science," in Gottschalk, The Use of Personal Documents (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1945), pp. 164-173.

sort of scholarship around this material the definite flavor of the changing anthropological experience over the last one hundred years. That is to say that Native American "myths," "legends," and "folk-tales" have been seen variously as residues of primitive history and psychology, more palatable formulations of societal restrictions or pieces of ethnological data with which to trace diffusion patterns, depending on the investigator. The effort to define the emerging discipline of anthropology as a behavioral science has not, of course, encouraged scholars in the field to look at Native American material from a literary perspective. To be sure one of the chief promoters of the scientific direction of anthropology, Franz Boas, was conscious of the literary aspects of the material he was collecting and treating "scientifically." His scientific orientation seems not to have blunted his literary sensitivity beyond demanding so much time as to render the literary achievement miniscule next to the enormity of his scientific production. Paul Radin and many other early ethnographers produced exceptional treatments of the literary aspects of the materials in their hands, mainly as by-products of their ethnology. More recently Gladys Reichard, Melville Jacobs, and other "social scientists" have produced works of remarkable literary sensitivity. Folklorist Alan Dundes is one of the few investigators of any discipline to grant Native American materials the meager assumption of unity.⁵ However, anthropology as a "social science" remains the

⁵Boas' literary scholarship is well represented in Race, Language, and Culture (New York: Macmillan, 1940). Radin's The Evolution of an American Indian Prose Epic: A Study in Comparative

concern of the anthropologist and those materials which fall within his framework are treated "scientifically." When Native American imaginative material appears in the anthropology classroom, it is treated anthropologically, its literary qualities being for the most part beyond the scope of the class. If this dissertation says anything implicitly or explicitly it is that Native American material does deserve the serious attention of the academic community as literature somewhere.

I have been arguing, then, somewhat circuitously that "English" departments need to broaden their scope to include literatures out of traditions other than the British-American, and that one very logical--in fact, ethically necessary--area for this expansion is Native American literatures. I offer this dissertation as a beginning, the application of the methods of the literary critic to the imaginative materials of another culture.

A word about its worth. The very existence of this dissertation indicates that a consideration of the literary heritage of other cultures is within the realm of potential consideration for "English" departments generally. Moreover, its existence indicates that at least a part of the literary critical community considers the Omaha

Literature (Basel, Switzerland: Ethnological Museum, 1954, 1956), is especially good. See Gladys Reichard, An Analysis of Coeur D'Alene Indian Myths (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1947); Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). I discuss Dundes' Morphology of North American Indian Folktales, Folklore Fellows Communication No. 195 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1964), in more detail later.

oral tradition worthy of serious consideration as literature. If this argument is tautological, it is at worst a useful tautology. A small academic validation of the worth of the Omaha tradition might be another tool in larger efforts to expand the culturally parochial interest of teachers of "English" and their students.

There is at least the possibility of a more immediate use. Whenever the possibility for more extensive use of Native American materials is raised, the response immediately adopts one or both of two complaints: "There are no materials" or "I don't know how to approach this strange stuff." The first complaint is now more and more easily dealt with, as the paperback revolution proceeds. One half the materials used in this dissertation is now available in reasonably priced paperback editions.⁶ As for the second complaint, while this dissertation is nothing so useful as a "bag of tricks" for teaching Native American literary materials, it does demonstrate one rather accessible approach to the material--an approach which takes full cognizance of the cultural milieu in which the literature exists, while dealing at some length with its uniqueness and detail.

It might be well at this point to discuss my approach briefly and to state the way it is applied in the following pages. Having

⁶The University of Nebraska Press has reprinted The Omaha Tribe in a two volume paper edition. The other half will be available within the next six months when Swallow Press will publish a version of Dorsey's Ojigih Language edited by Roger Welsch. This situation is being repeated with many other tribal literatures. A good bibliographic source for recent reprints is the Index to Literature on the American Indian, a yearly index published by the American Indian Historical Society.

rejected the anthropological approach, I'll cite an anthropologist. Claude Levi-Strauss has characterized the "primitive" mythmaker as a bricoleur, one who works by rearranging a finite number of elements, finding in each fresh configuration a new statement whose message or "logic" resides in the very configuration itself.⁷ That is, "primitive" imaginative materials have significant patterns. Literary works "mean" through adherence to or deviation from conventions, from patterns. The particular problem one faces when dealing with the literary productions of another culture, particularly a culture outside the Western tradition, is that one's sense of what constitutes adherence and what constitutes deviation is lost. More precisely, one lacks the information which allows him to recognize the very patterns which constitute a literary work. The identification of these patterns, then, gives us the basis for literary appreciation. This dissertation examines the imaginative productions of the nineteenth-century Omaha, and more particularly their literature, by detailing a few important thematic patterns whose recognition allow and assist literary appreciation. I show that individual pieces of the heritage, while patterned and integral themselves on several levels, can be made more intelligible to the literary critical mind by reference to the larger patterns identified.

Chapter Two is an effort to describe in a general way nineteenth-century Omaha culture so that the reader has some means of understanding

⁷Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 17-22.

and appreciating the special flavor of the experience which Omaha literature orders. In this chapter I treat the relation of Omaha culture to other American Indian cultures, the migrations of the Omaha prior to their historic residence in Nebraska, and the most important elements of nineteenth-century Omaha life; their relatively complex system of gentes, their more important social structures, rituals, and societies, and finally their conception of the family. The chapter tries to provide the general cultural context in which the particular pieces of literature exist and find their meaning.

Chapter Three works with those imaginative productions of the nineteenth-century Omaha which are represented in The Omaha Tribe by Alice Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, himself an Omaha.⁸ In this chapter I treat particular pieces of the Omaha literary heritage, be they "legend" or "ritual poetry," with reference to the dominant theme of emergence through increasingly stable states of existence which I find not only represented in the literature but in the ritual life of the tribe as well. Chapter Three takes the general information described in Chapter Two and gives it a concrete focus as part of a literary theme working in the imaginative material. I further note that the themes delineated work on the social level in the sacred legend of the people and on the individual level in much of the ritual poetry surrounding the individual's entrance into the tribe.

⁸ Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, The Omaha Tribe, Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1905-1906 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911).

Chapter Four treats the Omaha material collected by Rev. J. O. Dorsey published in the Ojéiha Language.⁹ In this chapter the focus becomes even more particular as I show in what ways individual Omaha stories are ordered and to what extent these individual stories exhibit common thematic patterns. Throughout I try to demonstrate how the individual pieces of a story may be understood in relation to the structure of the story itself, in relation to themes which exist in all of Omaha imaginative material, and in relation to the socio-historical context sketched in Chapter Two and developed in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Five I suggest the ways in which my study has reference to present Omaha literature as I experience it during my stay on the Omaha reservation at Macy, Nebraska during the 1970-71 academic year. Chapter Six concludes.

⁹James Owen Dorsey, The Ojéiha Language, Contributions to North American Ethnology, vol. 6 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1890).

CHAPTER II

NINETEENTH CENTURY OMAHA CULTURE: A CONTEXT

The temporal placement of an oral literature is problematic. The publication dates--1890 and 1911--of the two major sources for this study indicate closure of fieldwork which spanned the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The intent of these early students of the Omaha was, however, to describe precontact Omaha culture, and "old" way. Consequently the myths and ritual songs collected might be more accurately placed along with the culture described as representative of the first half of the nineteenth century. To be sure, Omaha people had contacts with Europeans well before 1800. As early as the middle of the seventeenth century they encountered French traders.¹ The brunt of the European invasion, however, was suspended until the massive influx of white settlers in the middle of the nineteenth century, which resulted in the establishment of a government Indian agency and concomitantly a Presbyterian mission (1845) among the Omaha.

Reviewing Omaha culture in 1932, Margaret Mead described three stages in the increasing contact with whites.² The first stage of contact with European trappers and fur-traders continued until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the buffalo disappeared

¹Fletcher and LaFlesche, p. 611.

²Margaret Mead, The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe (1932; rpt. New York: Capricorn, 1966), pp. 23-30.

and substantial numbers of white settlers arrived. During these years "traditional" Omaha society was able to function without major change or serious disruption. By the turn of the century the Omaha had incorporated a good many of the conventions and outward appearances of the white small farmer, while retaining to a substantial degree their cultural identity. During this second period a delicate balance was maintained in Omaha life. Around 1910, the "period of trust" between Congress and the Omaha people ended and serious erosion of their land base and "old" ways began; Mead identifies this as the outset of a third period. The literature which this dissertation treats clearly belongs to the first period as defined by Mead. While I am aware of the rapid changes Omaha culture was experiencing at the end of the century, I label the literature treated in this dissertation as "nineteenth century."

Before dealing with specific pieces of this nineteenth-century literature, it seems essential to gain some general notion of the elements of Omaha culture at the time. In this chapter I will provide such an overview. The purpose of drawing this overview is to give a socio-historical context, a localization, within which to treat the imaginative productions of the Omaha in succeeding chapters.

Throughout the chapter I rely heavily on the work of three students of Omaha life, J. O. Dorsey, Alice Fletcher, and Francis LaFlesche, supplementing a summary of their work with relevant material from archeologists, historians, and ethnographers of other

tribes and later periods.³ I begin by indicating the relation of Omaha people to other North American Indian groups, follow with a sketch of what is known of the movements of the Omaha people prior to their residence in north-eastern Nebraska, and finally describe briefly and generally the more important elements of nineteenth century Omaha life as reported by the ethnographers mentioned above.

Affiliations

It is difficult to determine the precise cultural affiliations of the Omaha people. Some ethnographers stress the Woodland characteristics of the tribe, others stress the Plains influences. It is generally agreed, however, that the tribe was at some point in the past a participant in the Woodland cultures and that only in the few centuries preceeding white contact came under extensive Plains influence.

The linguistic classification of the Omaha is more certain. In 1883, J. O. Dorsey classified the Omaha along with four other tribes--the Osage, Ponca, Quapaw and Kansa--under the term "Cegiha."⁴

³The publications of Rev. J. Owen Dorsey are the result of field work among the Omaha in the 1870's and 1880's. His Omaha Sociology, Third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, 1881-82 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), is summarized throughout this chapter. The field work of Alice Fletcher stretched across some twenty-nine years prior to the publication of the Omaha Tribe in 1911 with Francis LaFlesche, himself an Omaha.

⁴J. O. Dorsey, "The Comparative Phonology of Four Siouan Languages." Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1883 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), pp. 916-929.

Dorsey indicates that the term was in general use at the time among the peoples of each of the groups to indicate membership in the larger linguistic group which he identifies.⁵ The term means "belonging to the people of this land" and seems to correspond in use to the Iowa-Oto "Chiwere" and the Dakota-Dioux, "Dakota." Fletcher and LaFlesche disagree with Dorsey claiming that the term "Ȝegiha" has "no tribal significance hwatever, nor has it ever been used to indicate the Omaha people or their place of abode."⁶ However appropriate the term might be, the tribal grouping that it stands for is a valid one. Fletcher and LaFlesche mention the close linguistic and cultural ties among the five cognate tribes. More recent work in linguistics by C. F. Voegelin, Hans Wolff and others has supported Dorsey's original grouping.⁷ As a result the term "Ȝegiha" is generally accepted as indicating the five cognate tribes--Omaha, Quapaw, Kansa, Osage, and Ponca.

⁵Dorsey, Omaha Sociology, p. 211.

⁶Fletcher and LaFlesche, p. 37. Though they note that "if while playing a game a participant were asked, 'to which side to you belong?' the answer would be 'Thegiha b^xthi^aha' (I belong to this side.)" "Thegiha" would seem to indicate only a division in the context of a game. James H. Howard confirms Dorsey's use of the term, however, in his investigation of the Ponca. See The Ponca Tribe, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 195 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), pp. 5-6.

⁷C. F. Voegelin, "Internal Relationships of Siouan Languages," American Anthropologist, 13 (1941), pp. 246-249; Hans Wolff, "Comparative Siouan I, II, III," International Journal of American Linguistics, 16 (1950), pp. 61-66, 113-121, 168-178; also Harry Hoijer, "Introduction to Linguistic Structures of Native North America," Viking Fund Publication in Anthropology, no. 6 (New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., 1946).

The descriptive term Omaha has apparently been applied to the tribe since their separation from the Quapaw around 1500 A.D. One account of this separation says:

The people were moving down the Uha'i ke river (Ohio). When they came to a wide river they made skin boats in which to cross the river. As they were crossing, a storm came up. The Omaha and Iowa got safely across, but the Quapaw drifted down the stream and were never seen again until within the last century.⁸

"Umo'ho" means against the current or upriver, while "quapaw" means with the current or downriver. These terms have reference to the tradition cited above.⁹

Migrations

Tribal traditions and linguistic evidence indicate that the five cognate tribes once constituted one larger group prior to a series of divisions possibly occurring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Archeological evidence first places peoples with Siouan characteristics in an area centered in Northern Kentucky as members of the Indian Knoll Culture.¹⁰ Some of these Siouan peoples seem to have been present in the Ohio valley during the rise of the Hopewell Mound builder culture during the Middle Woodland Period and to have had a part in that culture. Whether or not the Cegiha were a part of

⁸Fletcher and LaFlesche, p. 36.

⁹The Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico entry on the Omaha written by J. O. Dorsey and Cyrus Thomas lists some 47 variations in the spelling of "Omaha." Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 30 (1905, rpt. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1965), volume II, pp. 119-120.

¹⁰George Hyde, Indians of the Woodlands: From Prehistoric Times to 1725 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962, p. 8.

the Hopewell culture is a matter of conjecture. Hyde suggests that several traits of the *Wegonka* groups--their high level of tribal organization, recognition of both sky and earth deities, gens haircutting patterns and traditions of residence in the Ohio valley suggest a strong *Wegonka* presence in the Hopewell civilization.¹¹ There is no firm archeological support for this theory. James B. Griffin suggests that the *Wegonka* group may have been part of the high Middle Mississippian culture as influences of this culture appear on the Plains in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries:

As a working hypothesis I have proposed elsewhere that the Mississippi Pattern influences in the Plains were the results of the movements of specific cultural units from the Mississippi Valley. The first of these is strongly associated, culturally, with the sites in the Cahokia region. They moved from there into the Kansas City area.... Apparently this actual movement of people modified the eastern section of the Upper Republican giving rise to the Nebraska Aspect. Possibly a slightly earlier or concurrent movement from the Aztalan area to the west took place, producing first, the Canby Focus in south-central Minnesota. Then it moved into Western Iowa to become the Mill Creek Aspect. The later Mill Creek sites in South Dakota acquired Upper Republican and some Woodland traits. These sites were one might postulate, occupied by the proto-historic Ponca and Omaha.¹²

Omaha tradition tells of a migration similar to the one sketched by Griffin.¹³ At the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers the Quapaws were said to have traveled to the south (down stream) while the

¹¹Hyde, p. 68.

¹²James B. Griffin, "Culture Change and Continuity in Eastern United States Archeology." In Man in Northeastern North America, ed. Frederick Johnson, vol. 3 (Andover: Peabody Foundation for Archaeology, 1946), pp. 37-95. Quoted in Howard, p. 10.

¹³Unless otherwise noted, I follow the migration tradition sketched by Dorsey in "Migrations of the Siouan Indians," American

other four tribes continued up the Mississippi to the point where the Missouri enters, the site of the city of St. Louis. This first separation is generally considered to have taken place prior to 1500, as it preceded DeSoto's arrival on the Mississippi (c. 1541).

After a period of residence on the lower Missouri the ~~Legi~~ha group split again, the Kansa tribe moving up the south side of the Missouri to locate in Eastern Kansas, while the Osage followed the Osage river southward. The Omahas and Poncas seem to have advanced north through the present state of Iowa to a point on lower Des Moines river. Here they are said to have joined with a group of Iowas and to have continued northward to the area of the pipestone quarries in the southwest corner of Minnesota.

Archeological data provides us no clear indication of the steps the Ponca and Omaha followed in moving from the pipestone region into their historic homes in Northeastern Nebraska. Their presence has been substantiated in many sites throughout the area, however.¹⁴ J. O. Dorsey indicates that the Omaha and Ponca accompanied by the Iowa moved

Naturalist, 20 (1886), pp. 211-212 and his Siouan Sociology, Fifteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1893-1894 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), p. 191. W. J. McGee reorganizes this material in "The Siouan Indians," also in the 15th ARBAE, pp. 191-194. The migration tradition is traced by Fletcher and LaFlesche, pp. 72-82. LaFlesche treats the tradition further in "Omaha and Osage Traditions of Separation," Proceedings of 19th International Congress of Americanists, 1915 (Washington, 1917), pp. 459-462. See also William Duncan Strong, An Introduction to Nebraska Archeology, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collection, vol. 93, no. 10 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), pp. 16-17.

¹⁴Howard, pp. 11-14.

Omaha Culture

As is evidenced by the preceding discussion of the migrations of the prehistoric Omaha, it is exceedingly difficult to place the ancestors of this tribe in time and space prior to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is nearly as difficult to determine the cultural position of the historic Omaha, as their culture is a mixture of elements from the Woodlands culture and the High Plains culture.¹⁷ Clark Wissler places the Omaha with the Arikara, Hidatsa, Iowa, Kansas, Mandan, Missouri, Osage, Oto, Pawnee, Ponca, and Santee-Dakota in an "Eastern Plains" or "village" grouping in his treatment of the Plains culture area.¹⁸ More significantly for our purposes, Paul Radin notes clear cultural and specifically literary connections among the Winnebago, the Chiwere (Iowa, Oto), and the Jegiha.¹⁹ Our concern here, however, is not with the precise placement of the Omaha in the scheme of culture areas, but rather with those aspects of their culture which have been described and which seem to have some relation to the Omaha literary tradition. Using, in the main, material from the work of J. O. Dorsey, Alice Fletcher, and Francis LaFlesche, I will describe the general organization of the tribe, its constituent gens, the

¹⁷Clark Wissler, The American Indian: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the New World, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 219-220.

¹⁸Clark Wissler, North American Indians of the Plains (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1912), p. 17.

¹⁹Paul Radin, The Evolution of an American Indian Prose Epic: A Study in Comparative Literature, Part I (Basel, Switzerland: Ethnographical Museum, 1954), p. 10.