

# Native American Song and English Versions: Translation between Oral and Literate Cultures<sup>1</sup>

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When I tell these stories do you picture it, or do you just write it down?<sup>2</sup>

Translation makes works of literature available to another culture by reproducing them in its language. As a reproduction it is a kind of picturing, i.e. it has iconic character. However, translations of the same work may look quite different from each other; the type of picturing depends on the translators' and their audience's notion of what a "work of literature" is.

To the following discussion a rough distinction can be made between two extreme positions, which, in practice, are linked in various forms of compromise. The literary text may be considered as referring to an ideal *structure* of meanings, behind its realization in language (as *langue* rather than *parole*). Alternatively, the work of literature may be considered as an *event*, associated with specific occasions under specific cultural conditions. The two notions of literature are associated with two culture types: In literate culture meaning is taken to be inherent in the text; in oral culture meaning can only be present in an event.

Translators accepting the first view of literature try to go back to the ideal structure and to re-create it in another language.<sup>3</sup> They will never court their audiences but remain faithful to the original; the audience will be able to appreciate their translations, because they share in what is generally human. "Literal" translation here may be a term of praise. Translators accepting the event-view of literature, on the other hand, cannot take for granted the audience's experience; indeed, it is

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Anglistentag 1987 Tübingen: Vorträge*, ed. by Hans-Werner Ludwig. Giessen: Hoffmann, 1988. 209-221.

<sup>2</sup> A Zuni asking Dennis Tedlock, collecting his tales Tedlock 55.

<sup>3</sup> On the Platonist assumptions underlying this notion, cp. Belitt 38.

precisely what they have to re-create in the culture of the target-language.

Translation from an oral into a literate culture therefore poses difficult problems, in which picturing of another kind plays a role, as we shall see. This can be illustrated by attempts to render Native American songs into modern English poetry.<sup>4</sup> In the original these songs are part of cultures that can do without writing and reading. They may be compared to intricate sets of rules and semantic elements, shared by those involved in the event of the song's performance. They are part of a rich but circumscribed "tribal context"<sup>5</sup>; their words therefore strike an outsider as complex and allusive.

Lew Sarett tried to cope with this problem in his re-workings of Indian songs and rituals: He notes that Indian songs usually have few words.

If these words are supplemented by an understanding of the accompanying ritual, symbols, dance steps, and pantomime, and by knowledge of Indian legends, superstitions, and religion, the fragmentary phrases of the song may suggest a wealth of ideas and beauty." (Sarett xx-xxi).

But he is aware that this means writing from the point of view of the onlooker rather than the participant (Sarett 337).

In an oral culture, the words of a song cannot be recorded, but the song can be alluded to by mnemonic devices like pictographs. These refer to the tune and the basic idea of the song, and possibly the sequence of semantic elements; they

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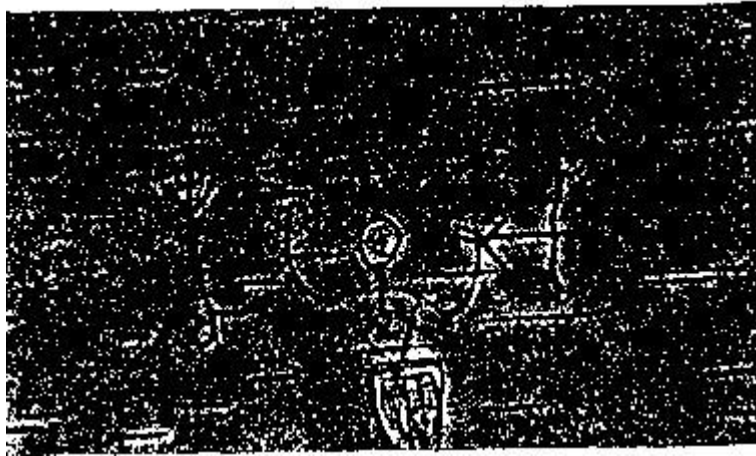
<sup>4</sup> William Bevis surveys the history of Native American anthologies in English, our main source for translations, from 1907 to 1972. He finds "the quality of the anthologies declining--they are becoming less accurate, less annotated and broader in scope" (Bevis 701). Bevis' notion of accuracy indicates where he stands; there is also a more positive interpretation of the developments described by him: instead of the texts having increasingly been adapted to our tastes, we may have found new and better ways of getting access to them.

<sup>5</sup> Richard and Nora Dauenhauer use this term. "Tlingit songs tend to be laconic. That is, they assume that the listener knows the circumstances surrounding the event described and the motives for composition. Also the listener is of the same cultural background as the composer." R. Dauenhauer and N. Dauenhauer quoted by Benamou 133-34.

allow for variation, repetition and extension. The function of pictographs is illustrated by the Chippewa songs that the ethnographer Frances Densmore collected at the beginning of the twentieth century. She writes:

All the songs are recorded in mnemonics on strips of birch bark. The Indian picture preserves the idea of the song, while our printed page preserves the words which are supposed to express the idea but which often express it very imperfectly. (Densmore 15)<sup>6</sup>

Densmore illustrates the use of such a pictograph:



[The singer] stated that the horizontal line represents the edge of the wigwam, along which are arranged various articles of value indicated by the dots. At each end are torches, the light of which falls on the gathered wealth, causing many of the articles to glitter. These articles belong to a woman standing with upraised hands and wearing a pearl necklace with a locket. [...]

In singing this song the woman pointed to one portion of the picture after another, tapping the birch bark lightly as she sang and traversing the row of dots, the horizontal line, the outline of the necklace, and the torches, then beginning again at the row of dots. (Densmore 17)<sup>7</sup>

When such oral songs are adapted to the modes of communication in literate culture, they undergo radical transformations. The ethnographer's musical and phonological

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, pictographs have not been recorded for all poems; I therefore have to choose my material from several songs.

<sup>7</sup> The words of the song are in translation: "Light / Around you / Chief / Woman (princess)" Densmore 17.

transcription is the first and crucial step away from the original. The oral song is divided into a tune and a text, and both become fixed.

Figure 2 gives an example of how Densmore prints the Chippewa songs in her collection (Densmore 96):

Voice  $\text{♩} = 56$   
 Recorded without drum

Words

Kimaniđo'wihe'	.....	You are a spirit
Kimaniđo'witu'	.....	I am making you a spirit
Ênda'nabliyan'	.....	In the place where I sit
Kimaniđo'witu'	.....	I am making you a spirit

Reading the transcription, we lack the sense of the occasion of which this song is traditionally part. The song is a sad incantation to be sung while a member of the Medicine (Mide) lodge is dying. Rhythm was crucial to it,<sup>8</sup> and the song would

<sup>8</sup> "The rhythm of a Chippewa song is as much a matter of composition as the melody and often expresses the idea of the song. [...] In many songs there is a recurring rhythmic unit composed of one to four or more measures; in other songs there is no recurring rhythmic unit and in many songs of this class the entire melody constitutes a rhythmic unit, complete and satisfactory in itself. Continued repetition of such a song gives to the entire performance the effect of a homogeneous whole." (Densmore 5.)

be repeated. Footnotes cannot replace this loss; on the contrary, they reinforce the literate character of the text.<sup>9</sup>

The next step, the translation of the words into English makes the transformation from one type of poetry into another obvious.<sup>10</sup> *You are a spirit*, like other songs from Densmore's collection, has become a popular anthology piece. It is to be found, for example, in Margot Astrov's influential collection *The Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry*, first published in 1946. In her introduction Astrov formulates two requirements that a translator should meet: "linguistic fidelity to the original" and the communication of the "cultural matrix." (Astrov 5)<sup>11</sup> In her collection the song appears as follows, above a note explaining the situation in which it was sung:

You are a spirit,  
I am making you a spirit,  
In the place where I sit  
I am making you a spirit.  
(Astrov 75)

This is not a translation of the song but literally reproduces the wordlist that Densmore adds to her transcription. As is appropriate in a wordlist serving as an explanatory note, Densmore leaves out all the vocables, sounds without glossable meaning, and regularizes the words, which in song may be distorted by the requirements of rhythm or tune.

Offering such a wordlist as a translation may seem a strange procedure, but it is common in anthologies of Native American poetry. It fulfils the requirements of a literate notion of literature by emphasizing the poem's semantic structure.<sup>12</sup> At

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this is the record of one performance, made outside its context. She found somebody who was ready to sing it to her, although people were very reluctant to do so (Densmore 95) This already may have affected the shape of the song to some extent.

<sup>10</sup> The following discussion of the song "You are a spirit [...]" is based on McAllister.

<sup>11</sup> On the problematic of Astrov's procedures, see Hymes, and (for narratives) Tedlock 31–61.

<sup>12</sup> Cp. also the sections reproducing Chippewa songs in Cronyn 16–34; Levitas 31; Densmore 89,127; Bierhorst 130; Witt and Steiner 134–36; Rothenberg (*Shaking the Pumpkin* 328–35) does something similar: He prints poeticized versions of the wordlists beside the pictographs associated with them. The most important exception I have come across is Velie 136–51, who offers a reproduction of the tune, the transcription and the wordlist from Densmore.

the same time the words removed from their tribal context, which would demand that we are familiar with the significance of *making*, *spirit*, and the place where the singer is sitting. The song is radically transformed into a poem in the Western modern tradition.

The rendering of another Chippewa song, probably the best-known in Densmore's collection, takes the translation into literate poetry one step further. In Astrov's anthology it reads:

A loon  
I thought it was  
But it was  
My love's  
Splashing oar.  
(Astrov 79)

Again, only Densmore's wordlist is reproduced—but this time only in part. Astrov prints the first of three stanzas. The third stanza is similar to the first; the second contains the following words:

To Sault Ste. Marie  
He has departed  
My love  
Has gone on before me  
Never again  
Can I see him.  
(Astrov 150)

Astrov's misreading may be due to an oversight: The wordlists for the second and third stanzas do not appear on the same page as the one for the first,<sup>13</sup> but this oversight was made possible by her expectations. In the loon-poem Astrov observes "such a strange resemblance to those exquisite little poems of classical Japanese literature that I cannot refrain from calling the reader's attention to this fact." She sees parallels between the haiku and Native American poetry:

In order to understand part of the American Indian's poetry one must be well trained in swiftly reacting upon the faintest suggestions, intimations, and symbols. He

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<sup>13</sup> The words reproduced by Astrov appear at the bottom of the left-hand page in Densmore, directly below the score, those left out at the top of the following one. Velie 140 also reproduces the second stanza but does not mention that there is a third.

very often gives the mere outline of a fleeting mood or of the lasting impression of an experience--opening in himself or in the listener a train of thoughts and emotions. (Astrov 79)

Astrov describes the function of allusion and suggestion in a manner that has little to do with “tribal context”. Instead it reminds us of an influential moment in twentieth century American literature, Imagism, and Ezra Pound's definition of the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” (Pound 4–5)<sup>14</sup>

The question in how far Astrov's versions—probably against the intentions of the translator—actually help the purpose of assimilating Native American to Western culture deserves exploration. It may be significant that the Native American poet Gerald Vizenor, himself a Chippewa, in a version of the loon-poem, has adopted the interpretation of the text as a haiku-like poem.

the sound of a loon  
i thought  
it was my lover  
paddling  
(Witt and Steiner 134)

At this moment in literary history language seemed farthest from sound and orality; T. E. Hulme could define verse as “image and not sound”. (Roberts 270) Yet, *Les extrêmes se touchent*. Imagism brought phonological writing again close to the pictograph of oral poetry: the Image may be described as an attempt to render a pictograph in words. Not surprisingly, Pound was soon to become interested in pictographs themselves; but unlike the Native American ones, “ideograms”, as he called them, were supposed to be of universal significance.

We may contrast Astrov's attempt to reproduce the semantic structure of Chippewa songs with the versions of Seneca songs offered, a quarter of a century later, by Jerome Rothenberg

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<sup>14</sup> The influence of Imagism on the reception of Native American poetry, via Alice Corbin Henderson, editor of *Poetry* magazine, and Mary Austin is documented in Ruppert 244, 255.

(1931-2024) in his anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin*.<sup>15</sup> Rothenberg stands in the tradition of the New American Poetics going back to Charles Olson, and eventually Whitman, a tradition perceptive to the oral values in poetry.<sup>16</sup> He was also a serious student of ethnopoetics. He was therefore aware of what may be lost in a translation from an oral into a literate culture.

Rothenberg attempts to reproduce not simply the semantic structure, but also the event—for a literate audience, whose notion of poetry is dominated by structural considerations.

Translation [...] is a means of delivery & of bringing to life. It begins with a forced change of language, but a change too that opens up the possibility of greater understanding. Everything in these song-poems is finally translatable: words, sounds, voice, melody, gesture, event, etc., in the reconstitution of a unity that would be shattered by approaching each element in isolation. A full & total experience begins it, which only a total experience can fully bring across. (Rothenberg, *Pre-Faces & Other Writings* 91)<sup>17</sup>

Here only one example of “total translation” can be discussed, the first of twelve opening songs to the ceremony which the Senecas call “Shaking the Pumpkin” in English. Rothenberg describes the opening songs as

fixed pieces sung by the ceremonial leader [...] before he throws the meeting open to the individual singers [who, handing around the pumpkin, then sing songs of their own choice]. The melody & structure of the first nine are

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<sup>15</sup> Rothenberg's collection is very uneven: Where he depends on the work of others, he makes the same mistakes as they do; cp. also .Rothenberg (*Technicians of the Sacred* 202–03), and his Astrovian commentary on 474. Where his versions are based on his personal involvement with Native Americans, as they are in the case of the Senecan songs, they often offer striking and convincing solutions.

<sup>16</sup> Cp. also Rothenberg and Quasha.

<sup>17</sup> This means that there is no single correct procedure in translation. In some cases, as with the Navajo horse songs, which Rothenberg translated based on tape-recordings, sound may come to be the dominant element. Cp the “Horse-Songs of Frank Mitchell” No. XII and XIII in Rothenberg (*Shaking the Pumpkin* 350–53), with an explanatory note on , where Rothenberg calls his version “my almost final working (the ‘final’ one would *not* be written down.”

identical: very slow, a single line of words ending with a string of sounds, etc., the pattern identical until the last go-round, when the song ends with a grunting expulsion of breath into a weary “ugh” sound. I had to get all of that across: the bareness, the regularity, the deliberateness of the song, along with the basic meaning, repeated vocables, emphatic terminal sound, & (still following Johnny John's [the informant's] reminder to play around with it “if everything's all right”) a little something of my own. (Rothenberg, “Total Translation” 83)

Rothenberg translates these songs into “paginal structures”; (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 404) each song is meant to be printed on a page of its own, to suggest the slow pace of the ceremony. The first song, whose repeated line is “The animals are coming by heh eh heh” becomes in Rothenberg's translation: (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 16)\_

T	
h	
e	
The animals are coming by	
n	
i	
m	
a	
l	
s	
	H E H E H H E H
	H E H E H H E H
	H E H U H H E H
	H E H E H H E H
	H E H E H H E H

This text is not meant to be read out, as Rothenberg makes clear:

My intention was to account for all vocal sounds in the original but—as a more “interesting” way of handling the minimal structures & allowing a very clear, very pointed emergence of perceptions—to translate the poems onto the page, as with “concrete” or other types of minimal poetry. (Rothenberg, “Total Translation” 83)

Rothenberg's translation, especially the rendering of the vocables, recreates some elements of the original experience

he describes. The grid of letters, over which the eye may roam, reproduces the variability of oral song.<sup>18</sup>

On a different level, the visual structure of the poem looks like a plan of the ceremony. The title printed vertically, *The animals*, according to Rothenberg, is “the only move I make without immediate reference to the Seneca version.” (Rothenberg, “Total Translation” 84). Titles being a characteristic of literate culture, (cp. Ong 125), this pictures a gate that we have to pass when entering into the ceremony. The rendering of the vocables, at this level, is suggestive of how songs are passed around freely during the ceremony.

Rothenberg accepts the conditions of literate culture: the poem has become one only for the eye. It can no longer be sounded; and, requiring to be read on the page, it forces the reader into total isolation.<sup>19</sup> Rothenberg sees an advantage in this: The extreme literateness of the paginal structure may insure “that the originals (wherein resides the power) remain with the Senecas, where they in fact belong.” (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 404)

Every presentation of a song or poem in writing, no matter whether phonological or pictographic, contains iconic elements; but they are of different kinds. In rendering an oral poem visually, they present the basic idea. In literate poetry, on the other hand, the iconic elements (the lines beginning with capitals, the ragged right margin, the surrounding white space) refer to the status of the text as a poem.

This difference is of general interest for the study of how orality and literacy interact. In English literature, for example, the association of pictures with texts, in particular poems shaped like objects, played a role in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—Puttenham, and Herbert, among others, come to mind. It became important again in the twentieth century, with e. e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, and Concrete poetry in general. Between these two periods object-

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<sup>18</sup> Rothenberg's procedure has not always been understood by his critics. Cp. Clements 203.

<sup>19</sup> We should also mention the danger that Concrete poetry, the parallels of which with Native American poetry Rothenberg uses very sensitively, may become “a new dogma of translation” (McAllister 309), like that of Imagism, a development that may be supported by a confusion of Indian pictographs with Concrete poetry.

shaped poems, do not play a considerable role, although poems were not, therefore, without visual form; instead of looking like an angel's wings, a lozenge, or a grasshopper, they were consistently shaped like poems.

The two periods have something in common that helps to explain the appearance of shaped poems in both. In both periods those practicing poetry made conscious use of the tensions between the two different cultural and communicative modes existing beside each other. At the turn from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century the tension between orality and literacy became urgent because of the rise of print as a means of literary communication, beside the old oral one.<sup>20</sup> In the twentieth century, the rise of non-print media (like the telephone, radio and television), which in some ways return to, in others mimic orality, has created a similar awareness of two conflicting modes.

Viewed in this historical light, the versions of Native American poetry offered by Astrov and Rothenberg are of particular interest. The project of translating oral poetry into English is itself a sign that oral poetry is viewed as equivalent to literate poetry. At the same time, the difference between their versions also marks a shift in the balance between literacy and orality and suggests the dynamic of their relationship.

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<sup>20</sup> The wording is deliberate. Useful as the notions of orality and literacy are, they must not be considered, as they were by Albert B. Lord and Marshall McLuhan, mutually exclusive. For a recent position similar to theirs, see Ong 128–30.

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