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BALZ ENGLER
(Basel)

NATIVE AM ERICAN SONG AND ENGLISH VERSIONS: TRANSLATION BETWEEN ORAL AND LITERATE CU LTURES

In my paper I shall illustrate what has happened to some Native American songs at the hands of ethnographers and anthologists, and compare two different ways of dealing with the problems that arise in translation between oral and literate cultures - and in translation in general.[1]

Problems begin early: Not even the notion of "the work of literature" can be taken for granted; it is an example of how we tend to impose our Western terms on phenomena that can only be subjected to them by using violence. For the purpose of my discussion a rough distinction can be made between two extreme positions, which, in practice, are linked in various forms of compromise. The work of verbal, art may be considered as referring to an ideal structure of meanings, behind its realization in language, and available to everybody who is ready to meet its challenge. Alternatively, the work of verbal art may be considered as an event associated with specific occasions under specific cultural conditions. The two notions of verbal art are associated with the two culture types: In literate culture meaning is often taken to be inherent in the text; in oral culture meaning can only be present in an event.

Having said this I have also suggested something that I cannot discuss in detail here. I consider the borderline between orality and literacy a shifting one, not, as there has been a tradition following Lord and McLuhan, as a radical one that resembles the line between prelapsarian bliss and the world after the Fall. And I am interested in the ways the two culture types continue to interact, as this has been described, for example, by Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody.

Translators simply accepting the first view of verbal art would try to go back to the ideal structure and to re-create it in another language.[2] They will never court their readers, but remain "faithful to the original"; they take it for granted that their readers will be able to appreciate their translations, because they share in what is universal, in what is generally human. "Literal" **<210>>** translation here may be a term of praise. Translators accepting the event-view of verbal art, on the other hand, cannot take for granted the recipients' reaction; indeed, it is precisely

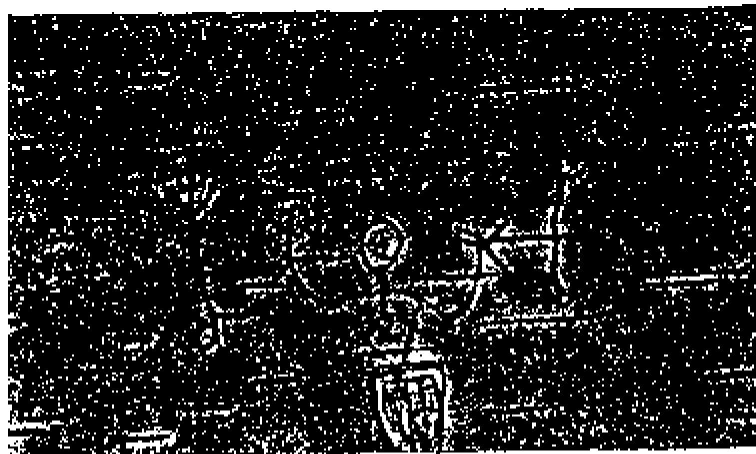
their experience (whatever we mean by this) that they have to re-create in the culture of the target-language.

The problem can be illustrated by attempts to render Chippewa and Seneca songs into modern English poetry.[3] 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";[4] this is why their words strike an outsider as complex and allusive.

In an oral culture, the words of a song cannot be recorded, but the song can be alluded to by mnemonic devices like pictographs. Unlike Western phonological writing, they allow for Variation, repetition and extension. The function of such pictographs is illustrated by Chippewa songs that the ethnographer Frances Densmore collected and transcribed at the beginning of this 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.[5]

Note that Densmore exclusively links the mnemonic record of the song with meaning here. She 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.[6]

This suggests that rhythm, too, can be perceived in the birchmarks.

When such oral songs are adapted to the modes of communication in literate culture they undergo radical transformations. The ethnographer's musical and phonological transcription is the first and crucial step away from the original, This step has three consequences: The oral song is removed from its context of occasion - or, viewed from another perspective, it is placed in a different context, that of a collection of songs, or, in this case a *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*. Then, the song is divided into a tune and a text, and, finally, both become fixed.

Figure 2 gives an example of how Densmore prints the Chippewa songs in her collection:[7]

Reading the transcription we lack the sense of the occasion of which this song was 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,[8] and the song would be repeated for as long as the person was between life and death. Explanatory footnotes cannot make up for this loss; on the contrary, they reinforce the literate character of the text as a piece of ethnography.[9]

Densmore's second step is the translation of the song's words into English. As is appropriate in a word list 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. The words are 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.

At this point the ethnographer's task of analysis and description may be said to have been accomplished. However, translation, in the sense we commonly use the term, has not yet been completed. One crucial further step still has to be taken: The descriptive material and its analysis have to be transformed into an equivalent according to Western literary tradition. Here the notion of verbal art, of literature, that has so far only been implicit in the analytical procedure becomes obvious.

You are a spirit, like other songs from Densmore's collection, is a popular anthology piece. It is to be found, for example, in M argot Astrov's influential collection The *Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry* first published in 1946.[10] 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.[11]

This is not a translation of the song, but, as you will have noticed, it literally reproduces the word-list that Densmore adds to her transcription. Offering such a word-list as a translation may seem a strange procedure, but it is common in anthologies of Native American poetry. It fulfills the requirements of a literate notion of verbal art by emphasizing the poem's semantic structure. The song is radically transformed into a a poem in the Western modern tradition.[12]

The rendering of another Chippewa song, probably the one most frequently anthologized from Densmore's collection,

takes the translation into literate Western poetry still further. It shows how translators' expectations can blind them to what their sources actually say; as. such it is also a striking illustration of the fact that it is often the translators' mistakes that tell us a great deal about the principles they follow in their work.[13]

In Astrov's anthology the song reads:

> A loon
> I thought it was
> But lt was M y
> love's Splashing
> oar.[14]

Again, only Densmore's word-list is reproduced - but this time <u>only in part.</u> Astrov only prints the words of the first of three stanzas in Densmore. In Densmore the word list looks as follows:

> A loon
> I thought it was
> But it was M y
> love's
> Splashing oar.
>
> To Sault Ste. M arie
> H e has departed
> M y love
> Has gone on before me
> Never again
> Can I see him.

The third stanza is similar to the first.[15]

Astrov's misreading is due to an oversight: The wordlist for the second and third stanzas does not appear on the same page as the one for the first,[16] 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.[17]

Astrov perceives parallels between the *haiku* and this Native American song. This is significant: We should remind ourselves that, when the *haiku* was first received in Western literature at the beginning of this century, it was as an exotic form, and it was from this tradition of exoticism that the Imagists adopted the *haiku*. Associating the Chippewa songs with the *haiku* can therefore be seen as an attempt to domesticate the alien by forcing it into a fa-**<214>>** miliar tradition of the alien.

On the other hand, Astrov describes the function of

allusion and suggestion in these songs in a way that reminds one of Imagism.

> 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 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.[18]

This description does not take into account "tribal context." Instead, it reminds us of Ezra Pound's definition of the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[19]

At that moment in literary history language seemed farthest from sound and orality; T. E. Hulme could define verse as "image and not sound."[29] It seems ironic that this type of poetry should be considered equivalent to oral song. 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 - a typically literate claim.[21]

Astrov's versions are an extreme example of how oral poetry can be appropriated and domesticated by a literate culture. But her procedure in translating Native American songs is typical of what we find in most anthologies of Native American poetry. Put metaphorically, the fire is extinguished (doused in ink?). Halfburnt pieces of wood are recovered from the ashes, and shaped into forms that have a pleasing familiarity to those who could not be there while the fire was burning.

If the procedures described are inadequate, is there another way? 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 in his anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin.*[22] 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.[23] He is also a serious student of ethnopoetics, and therefore very much 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 - and this 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.[24]

This is a self-confident, even a presumptuous claim - and we have to test it in Rothenberg's practice.

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 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.[25]

In his translations of Native American song Rothenberg uses various methods, which indicates that *total* does not, as we might expect, mean "definitive," but rather "taking into account all the constituent elements." In his renderings of Navajo horsesongs, for example, he works with the tape recorder to produce structures of sound.[26] The Seneca songs, on the other hand, he translates into "paginal structures"; [27] each song is meant to be printed on a page of its own, to suggest the slow pace of the ceremony.[28] The first song, whose repeated line is 'The animals are coming by heh eh heh" becomes in Rothenberg's translation:[29]

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

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

> 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 *unto the page*, as with "concrete" or other types of minimal poetry.[30]

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.[31]

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."[32] Titles being a characteristic of literate culture,[33] this may be taken to picture 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.

At the same time, however, Rothenberg has to accept 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.[34] 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."[35] According to Rothenberg, it becomes possible to retain something of the strangeness experienced by the Western observer. But this claim fails to be persuasive, Rothenberg rather seems to be preempting certain criticisms that may be levelled against his version.

In the end, then, we may grant Rothenberg that he has managed to bring across certain characteristics of oral song that others have lost on the way; but at what cost?

Is translation from oral into literate cultures at all possible then? 1f translation means reproducing the essential features of a piece of verbal art for the audience in the target language then the answer has to be: no. This is not so because the technical problems are insurmountable (though they may well be so), but because translation, as we use the term, is itself a literate activity - for reasons that I have tried to illustrate. Translating as a technique by definition means isolating a song from its social context, objectifying it as a text, analyzing it, and reconstituting it in a different context. Oral cultures, moreover, will not show much understanding

for an activity like literary translation because they lack the universalizing tendencies that literate cultures have shown; on the contrary, songs will, as Rothenberg indicates, be considered as the possession of a community.

Still, there are differences between Astrov's and Rothenberg's versions. Do they signal an advance? Are Rothenberg's versions not just curiosities, arbitrary, even aberrant in the way they deal with their originals? We may have quick answers ready, but they tend to foreshorten an important sociological dimension. The differences between Astrov's and Rothenberg's versions, quite independently of their quality, tell us something about changes in the reading public. Astrov's version can take for granted a common notion of what literature "looks like", and of what translation is. Reactions to Rothenberg's visual (and aural) renderings, on the other hand, will vary between admiration and (more frequently) hostility. His versions depend on a notion of translating and a kind of reading that is not (no longer) generally shared.

The quasi-universal validity of one type of reading is associated with the claims of literacy. On the other hand, die emergence of several types of communicating poetry beside each other, practiced by different groups to different degrees, suggests a situation that is reminiscent of the situation among oral cultures.

The line between orality and literacy seems to be shifting in our culture. The project of translating oral poetry into English is itself, of course, a sign that oral poetry has come to be viewed as equivalent to literate poetry. But we should also be aware of the consequences of such a shift. As Rothenberg's version suggests, it will also mean that translation, as we know it, is on the way out.

NOTES

1 This paper, with a focus on changing notions of literature (and therefore a different introduction and conclusion), was offered at the "April Conference" in Cracow, 8-12 April 1987. It will be published in the Proceedings of that conference.

2 This was essentially Novalis' view of translation. On the Platonist assumptions underlying this notion, cf. Ben Belitt, Adam's Dream (New York: Grove Press, 1978), e.g., 38.

3 William Bevis in "American Indian Verse Translations", *College English* 35 (1974), 693-703, surveys the history of Native American anthologies in English, our main source for translations, from Natalie Curtis' *The Indians' Book: Songs and Legends of the American Indians* (1907; rpt. New York: Dover, 1968) to Jerome Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin; Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

He finds "the quality of the anthologies declining - they are becoming less accurate, less annotated and broader in scope" (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. - Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), devotes interesting chapters to the problem of translating Native American literature. Some of his conclusions coincide with points made here; but focuses are different. Whereas he is interested in how the interaction with Western culture has affected the development of Native American literature, here we are concerned with the translation of Native American sang as evidence for certain problems in translation.

4 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." Quoted from their paper 'The Ubiquitous Footnote: Ethnopoetics and Tlingit Song Translation" (Madison, WI, 1975) in Michel Benamou. "Postface: In Praise of Marginality," *Alcheringa* 2,2 (1976), 133-34.

Lew Sarett tried to cope with this problem in his reworkings of Indien songs and rituals *(The Collected Poems of Lew Sarett* [New York: Holt and Company, 1941]): 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" (xx-xxi). But he is aware that this means writing from the point of view of the onlooker rather than the participant (337).

5 Frances Densmore, ed. *Chippewa Music I Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* No. 45. 1910: 15. Unfortunately, pictographs have not been recorded for all poems; I therefore have to choose my material from various songs.

6 Densmore, 17. The words of the song are in translation "Light / Around you / Chief / Woman (princess)" (Densmore, 17).

7 Densmore, 96. The following discussion of the song "You are a spirit ..." is based an the article by H. S. McAllister , "'The Language of Shamans': Jerome Rothenberg's Contribution to American Indian Literature " *Western American Literature* 10, 1976, 293-309.

8 Densmore, 5: "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."

9 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 sing it to her. (Densmore, 95). This already may have affected the shape of the song to some extent.

10 See Margot Astrov, ed., *The Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry* (1946; rpt. Gloucester, M ass.: Peter Smith, 1970), 5 for a discussion of her principles. On the problematic of Astrov's procedures, see Dell Hymes 1965), "Some North Pacific Coast Poems: A Problem in Anthropological Philology," *American Anthropologist* 67, 316-41, and (for narratives) Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983) 31-61.

11 Astrov, 75.

12 Cf. also the sections reproducing Chippewa songs in George W. Cronyn, ed. (1934; 1973), *American Indian Poetry*, New York: Liveright, 16-31; Gloria Levitas, et al., eds. *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974, 31 (and Densmore, 89 and 127); John Bierhorst, ed. *In the Trail of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations* (New York: Farrar and Straus, 1971), e.g., 130; Shirley Hill Witt and Stan Steiner, eds. (1972), *The Way*. New York: Knopf, 134-36.

Jerome Rothenberg, in *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 Alan R. Velie, ed. (1979), *American Indian Literature. An Anthology*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 136-51, who offers a reproduction of the tune, the transcription and the word-list from Densmore.

13 Dell Hymes, it should be noted, has criticized versions like Astrov's in the article mentioned above, but his criticism aims in a direction different from the one I am following, and confirms rather than qualifies the criticisms made here. Hymes demands that die poetic structure of the original should be paid more attention, and that structural linguistics can be of great service in doing this. But his notion of structure is one that is essentially literate. He believes that what is "objective ... is the native text itself, where this has been adequately recorded" (in Rothenberg 362).

14 Astrov, 79.

15 Densmore, 150.

16 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.

17 Astrov, 79

18 Astrov, 79.

19 Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" in *Literary Essays* London: Faber, 1954, 4-5. 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 James Ruppert, "Discovering America: Mary Austin and. Imagism," in *Studies in American Indian Literature*, ed. by Paula Gunn Allen. New York: The Modern Language Association, 1983, 243-58, esp. 244, 255.

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 a contemporary 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)

20 Michael Roberts, *T E Hulme* (London, 1938), 270.

21 On some of the implications of this, see my article "'Go, my songs ... and defy opinion': The Modernist Poet and his Audience," *English Studies* 66 (1985), 316-25.

22 Rothenberg's collection is *very* uneven: Where he depends on the work of others, he makes the same mistakes as they do (cf. also his *Technicians of .the Sacred* [New York: Doubleday, 1969], 202-203, 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 Seneca songs, they often offer striking and convincing solutions.

23 Cf. also Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha, eds., *America, A Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetrv from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

24 Jerome Rothenberg, “Total Translation: An Experiment in the Translation of American Indian Poetry" *Pre-Faces & Other Writings*. (New York: New Directions, 1981), 76-92, 91. This means that there is no single correct procedure in translation. In some cases, as with the Navajo horse songs, which Rothenberg translated on the basis 'of tape-recordings, sound may come to be the dominant element. Cf. *The 17 Horse-Sones of Frank Mitchell: Nos. XXIII* (London: Tetrad Press, 1970). No. XII and XIII also appear in *Shaking the Pumpkin*, 350-53, with an explanatory note on 466; where Rothenberg calls his version "my almost final working (the "final" one would not be written

down)."

25 Rothenberg, "Total Translation," 83.

26 *Shaking the Pumpkin*, 466-68.

27 ,*Shaking the Pumpkin*, 404.

28 'Total Translation," 296.

29 *Shaking the Pumpkin*, 16.

30 Rothenberg, 'Total Translation," 83.

31 Rothenberg's procedure has not always been understood by his critics, Cf. William M. Clements, "Faking the Pumpkin: Jerome Rothenberg's Literary Offenses," *Western American Literature* 16 (1981) 193-204, 203.

32 "Total Translation," 84.

33 Cf. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: M ethuen, 1982)125-26.

34 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.

35 *Shaking the, Pumpkin*, 404.