Castro, Michael. Interpreting the Indian

1 *Early Translators of Indian Poetry*

I have naturally a mimetic temperament which drives me toward the understanding of life by living it. If I wished to know what went into the patterns of the basket makers, I gathered willows in the moon of white butterflies and fern stems when these were the ripest. I soaked the fibers in running water, turning them as the light turned, and did my ineffectual best to sit on the ground scraping them flat with an obsidian blade, holding the extra fibers between my toes. I made singing medicine as I was taught, and surprised the Friend-of-the-Soul-of-Man between the rattles and the drums. Now and then, in the midst of these processes I felt myself caught up in the collective mind, carried with it toward states of super-consciousness that escape the exactitudes of the ethnologist as the life of the flower escapes between the presses of the herbalist. So that when I say that I am not, have never been, nor offered myself, as an authority on things Amerindian, I do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in being an Indian.

Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm*

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a period in which Americans rediscovered the Indian, largely through his "poetry." This chapter traces the development of that renewed interest by examining the attempts of ethnologists, poets, and anthologists to interpret the meaning of "Indian poetry," both through literary translations and through attempts to identify the significance of those translations for American literature, cultural identity, and consciousness. Of necessity, it will also discuss the nature and characteristics of Native American poetry itself.

The central figure in the movement to bring Indian poetry to non-Indian Americans was Mary Hunter Austin, who pioneered the exploration of Indian consciousness in this century as a poet, playwright, essayist, and anthologist. Austin was one of the most active and influential of the early twentieth-century writers who redefined the meaning of the Indian for American culture. Through she is regarded as a minor poet today, Austin's efforts were extremely important in stimulating many of her contemporaries to consider the Indian's relevance to American cultural identity, poetry, and poetics, and in anticipating the concerns of more talented and influential poets later in the century. The fullest statement of Austin's ideas in this area is found in her essay "The American Rhythm" (1923), a discussion of which concludes this chapter. But before we can proceed with our examination of the varied approaches to American Indian poetry that culminate in "The American Rhythm," we must identify what Austin and others recognized as the central characteristic of that poetry and the cultures that produced it: what I term *holistic awareness.* Holistic awareness is, in a sense, what this book is really about: the quality that, more than any other, has made Indian poetry and cultures attractive and important to Americans in this century. By *holistic awareness* I mean the Indian's sense of oneness with the earth and with the creatures on it; the term suggests also the oneness, within each person, of body, mind, and spirit and the sense of overall oneness of material and spiritual reality.

What Austin claims to find among Indian peoples has been found elsewhere by American writers; strong parallels can be discovered, for example, in nineteenth-century transcendental

writings. Unlike Emerson or Whitman, however, Austin did not go to India but to the Indians; her claims are for the experience of peoples who have lived in America for thousands of years, rather than for German and Hindu philosophies. The growth of these values and perceptions from American soil makes them especially important for modern poets in search of mythopoeic roots or the spirit of place. Sitting under the Bo tree with Buddha is one thing; sitting in the sweat lodge with Black Elk quite another, as far as feeling at home in America is concerned. The breakdown of spiritual norms, the alienation of the individual from land, work, and self, give urgent importance to the healing properties and the unifying forces that have been claimed for Indian literature by Austin and others. To Austin and the writers discussed here, Indians are not the colorful exotics seen by nineteenth-century Americans confident of the power and coherence of their new culture. Instead they are the only genuine indigenous source of desperately needed poetic and personal values. On a literary level, Austin's and other writers' attention to Indian awareness can be seen as answering Emerson's call for a uniquely American poetry. On a social level, it anticipates and parallels the ecological thinking of people who have lately come to see overdependency on thechnology as destructive and unnatural. On a spiritual level, it parallels the modern quest for wholeness of the self articulated in the work of Jung and many others working in various disciplines throughout the century.

In "The American Rhythm," Austin concentrates on the expression of holistic awareness in Indian poetry. She explores its significance from several different angles, each of which anticipates the approaches of later poets. Essentially, Austin proposes that American poets study Indian poetry to acquire a broader consciousness, an awareness more in tune with nature and place, and that they study its forms, imagery, and compositional techniques as an alternative model for a new American poetry. She predicted that the holistic awareness implicit and explicit in Native American poetry would be paralleled in the form and content of an emerging American poetry, a poetry characterized by its intimate relationship to the American landscape and environment; by its open form, based on the organic rhythms of body and mind; by an increased reli-

ance on nonlinear, nonrational modes—a tendency toward the incantatory, imagistic, and spatial; and by the poetry's increased tendency to bring people together to experience collectively community and communion.

Though Austin's direct influence is limited today, her predictions are responsive to the literary leanings and longings of her times and to the literary and psychological temper of the twentieth century. Better and more influential poets who followed her have, in their own ways, emphasized and explored the very awareness and qualities to which she first pointed. The holistic awareness of the Indian has become an important resource, model, and theme for American poets.

The Early Ethnologists

The Indian's holistic awareness is reflected in all areas of his culture. It was first recognized and cited by American poets in the ceremonial chants, spells, and personal power songs that, following Austin, we now call "Indian poetry." Widespread attention to this body of literature is a fairly recent development. Not until the late nineteenth century did the first American anthropologists begin systematically and carefully recording and translating Indian chants and songs. Ethnologists like Washington Matthews ("The Mountain Chant: A Navajo Ceremony," 1887), James Mooney ("The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 1891; *The Ghost Dance Religion,* 1896), Francis LaFlesche and Alice Cunningham Fletcher ("A Study of Omaha Indian Music," 1893), and Frances Densmore *(Chippewa Music,* 1910 and 1913) are among the first and greatest recorders and translators. Their work was an important resource for poets and interpreters like Austin, and their translations, extracted from original scholarly contexts, are still anthologized today; in fact, they are more widely read now than at the time of their original publication.

The ethnologists published almost exclusively for a specialized scholarly audience, mainly in journals like *American Anthropologist* and the bulletins of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, and American Folklore Association. Unlike later poet-interpreters of Indian poetry and culture, the ethnologists did not seem to think that the

material they were translating had any particular relevance to the development of a new American poetry and identity. Rather, they saw themselves as either antiquarians or social scientists, scrupulously preserving for history the traditions and literatures of dying cultures. In doing so, however, they were consciously countering the stereotype of the Indian as an unsophisticated, barbaric savage. The work of the many anthropologists who studied Native American tribal people between 1880 and 1920 tended to establish that Indians were indeed capable of quite sophisticated thought as well as of complex, ingenious means of expression. As the antiquarian Daniel G. Brinton wrote in *Aboriginal American Authors* (1893), "the languages of America have every whit as high a claim on the attention of European scholars as the venerable documents of Chinese lore, the mysterious cylinders of Assyria, or the painted and figured papyri of the Nilotic tombs." Brinton, who developed his respect for the Indian mind through studying Indian languages, wrote the first literary criticism on Native American poetry in an essay of that title published in 1890.

The Indians' Book

Still, it was not until 1907, with the publication of Natalie Curtis's *The Indians' Book,* that the ethnological discovery of the rich variety of Indian poetry was introduced, almost unwittingly, to a popular audience. The book was intended as a collection of Native American myth, music, and song. Curtis was a musician and musicologist who, during the 1890s, had studied at the National Conservatory of Music in New York as well as in Europe. While visiting her brother in Arizona just after the turn of the century, she became fascinated with local Indian life and lore and began collecting and recording Indian songs, myths, and music. In 1903 she began to collect materials in earnest for *The Indians' Book,* traveling by train, wagon, and horseback to visit tribal peoples in remote locations all over the country. Scholarly curiosity motivated her, but she also felt that such a book would be of inestimable value to the Indian peoples themselves. She hoped "that this their own volume, when placed in the hands of their children, might help to revive for the younger generation that sense of the dig-

nity and worth of their race which is the Indians' birthright, and without which, no people can progress."[1]

Such a noble aim, Curtis found, ran contrary to the policies of Indian agents and missionaries who, in their efforts to acculturate Indian peoples, tended to suppress Indian languages and traditions. On more than one occasion Curtis's efforts were frustrated by the refusal of these masters of the Indians' fate to cooperate. She confronted this problem by enlisting the support of President Theodore Roosevelt.[2] Roosevelt's enthusiastic backing facilitated the necessary cooperation by government authorities and encouraged native informants, who would otherwise have feared repercussions, to participate in the project.

Curtis's problem in gathering materials underscores a long-standing and inherent contradiction in American governmental policy. On the one hand, traditional Indian cultures were being stamped out in a variety of ways by the policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which autocratically ruled reservation life. The most visible and brutal of these policies was forcibly separating Indian children from their families and sending them often hundreds of miles away from the reservations to BIA-run boarding schools where Indian languages and customs were prohibited and Indian identity destroyed. Opposing this practice was the government's support of the efforts of the ethnologists who were preserving, in the name of knowledge, the very traditions that the BIA was wiping out. Roosevelt's support for *The Indians' Book* was a benign gesture toward supporting a positive Indian image and self-concept, and it did enable Curtis to get on with her project, but it did little to soften the overall governmental oppressions.

As did many of her fellow ethnologists, Curtis came to see her work as a labor of love. She was warmly received by Indian peoples who offered her their friendship and trust and gave her the name *Tawa Mana* ("Song Maid"). Curtis reciprocated by giving full credit to her collaborators on the title page of *The Indians' Book:* "The Indians are the authors of this volume. The songs and stories and theirs; the drawings, cover design, and title pages were made by them. The work of the recorder has been but the collecting, editing, and arranging

of the Indians' contributions." Containing more than 150 songs from seventeen different tribes representing the eastern forest dwellers, the Plains and Great Lakes regions, the northwestern coast dwellers, and the peoples of the desert Southwest, the book is a rich sourcebook of American Indian cultures. It is arranged in sections containing explanations of the myths, legends, customs, and traditions of each tribe followed by texts of songs that are an integral part of the tribal lore. Following earlier ethnological models, Curtis presents the songs within a descriptive and explanatory context that makes their meaning more intelligible. She includes transcriptions of each song's melody in Western musical notation and, following the ethnological convention of the time, presents each song's lyrics in three forms: a phonetic transcription of its original language, a literal translation into English, and a free, poetic translation.

Not only a work of scrupulous scholarship, *The Indians' Book* was also artistically packaged and highly readable. But its most striking quality was the "poetry" of the translated songs. Curtis herself observed this in a note on her transcriptions: "the songs in this book are written after a new manner in that corresponding musical phrases are placed one beneath another like lines of verse. The system makes the form of the song to flash before the eye like the form of a stanza of poetry." Roosevelt also was struck by the book's "poetry," observing in a note to Curtis that was later printed as the frontispiece to most editions: "These songs cast a wholly new light on the depth and dignity of Indian thought, the simple beauty and strange charm of a vanished elder world—of Indian poetry." Roosevelt's public enthusiasm for *The Indians' Book* and the attention he called to its inherent poetry helped spread its popular reputation and encouraged a curiosity about and a positive attitude toward the recently conquered Indian population.

The book was reviewed widely and most favorably. *The Dial* recommended it at the top of a list of "Miscellaneous Holiday Books," stating, with the unthinking racist chauvinism and condescension typical of the times, that "to most white readers this book will be a revelation of the vaguely stirring genius and the art, mystic in its intent, spontaneous in its symbolism, of a child race."[3] *The American Review of Reviews*

praised the book highly, quoting Curtis's argument that it not only contained materials of exotic interest but also added something essential and otherwise missing from the American spirit:

> We are a people of great mechanical and inventive genius, but we are not naturally song-makers, poets, or designers. Can we afford to lose from our country any sincere and spontaneous art inpulses, however crude? The undeveloped talents native to the aboriginal American are precisely those in which the Anglo-Saxon is deficient.[4]

Here we have the first major statement of the theme that has characterized twentieth-century writers' interest in the Indian: that the red man represented in some way the missing aspects of the American self. Curtis went further, suggesting that there was something renewing for American art itself in the indigenous song of the Native American: "the folk music of any land is a soil from which genius draws sustenance for fresh growth, and the stimulus to the creative mind through contact with this native art should give America a new and vigorous art impulse." Poets like Austin and the others who followed came to Indian poetry seeking such a renewal.[5]

Indian "Poetry"

Despite the richness of its Indian materials and Curtis's accurate commentary on its ethnomusicological dimension, *The Indian's Book* became best known as a collection of Indian poetry, and this circumstance presents us with our first serious problem, both in seeing clearly what we are naming and in giving it the right name. Curtis herself, like virtually all her ethnologist colleagues, was precise in calling a song a song, as it were. But others used the term *poetry,* which is misleading because it applies a literary name to the chants, charms, and songs of an almost exclusively oral tradition. Nor is the misnaming trivial, for it carried an entire set of misconceptions with it. The motivation of these compositions is not the creation of an aesthetic artifact, as the term *poetry* would imply to an English-speaking audience of the twentieth century. Rather, the motive is magical. An Indian singer or chanter does not merely seek to entertain or to please; he wants to effect change in himself, in nature, or in his fellow human

beings. The word is understood and used as an instrument of power.

The word in Indian songs is also, more often than not, combined with meaningful gestures, music, pictorial or plastic arts (for example; sand paintings, masks), or dance. Its contexts are essentially mimetic, dramatic, and ceremonial. Ethnologists like Curtis were careful to describe the circumstances and the "accompanying acts" of each poem or song and to make clear that it was not originally intended, as poetry is, for contemplation by a silent reader. When poets began interpreting or "re-expressing" (Austin's term) Indian poetry, they, like the ethnologists, tended to realize that the nonverbal components of a given work were inseparable from the verbal ones and that they were crucial to the song's overall power. Unlike the ethnographers, however, poets reinterpreting Indian poetry rarely resorted to explanatory commentaries. Instead, they tended to exercise considerable freedom as translators, seeking to capture in their interpretations the hidden meanings and spirit of the originals. That is, they often tried to build into the words the nonverbal components of meaning, converting chants to lyrics. Often, as we shall see, the intent and meaning of the original were ultimately distorted or lost in the translated version.

Other Early Twentieth-Century Native American Literature

The attention given to the Native American by ethnologists and poets was not an isolated literary activity. *The Indians' Book* was only one of many significant and widely read books that followed the end of the Indian wars and the domestication of the Native American on government-controlled reservations. History, autobiography, fiction, and drama—as well as poetry—were all well served by the appearance of works largely based on careful scholarship and on close contact with Indian peoples rather than on stereotypes. One that preceded Natalie Curtis's work was Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), which exposed the hypocrisy and brutality of America's Indian policy. Jackson's novel *Ramona* (1884), dealing with California mission Indians, also enjoyed popularity and drew sympathetic attention to its subject. In 1890

Adolph Bandelier published his novel *The Delight Makers*. Based on his close contact with the Pueblo peoples of the desert Southwest, the book, still in print, is essentially accurate in its cultural detail, and quite readable. George Bird Grinnell, Frank S. Linderman, and Charles Lummis each published popular collections of tribal stories and myths before the turn of the century. These were followed by collections written by Indian writers—Gertrude Bonnin's (Zitkala-Sa's) *Old Indian Legends* (1901) and Charles A. Eastman's (Ohiyesa's) *The Soul of the Indian* (1911). Eastman's *Indian Boyhood* (1902), the first major Indian autobiography of the century, enjoyed considerable popularity. It was followed by the widely read *Geronimo, His Own Story* (1906, and still in print), edited by S. M. Barrett; *Goodbird the Indian* (1914), edited by Gilbert L. Wilson; Joseph K. Griffis's *Tahan: Out of Savagery into Civilization* (1915); and Eastman's *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). Eastman, a Santee Sioux and a physician who had studied medicine at Boston University, became a national celebrity, toasted by Roosevelt and the great men of his age as an American success story.

Even American theater reflected the contemporary revival of interest in the Indian. In 1911 Mary Austin's play, *The Arrow Maker,* was a smash hit on Broadway. Its plot involved the preposterous imposition of non-Indian women's-rights issues onto a plot focusing on a main character closely modeled after a Paiute *chisera* or medicine woman whom Austin had known personally. More authentically Indian were the names, costumes, scenery, dances, and songs, all of which had been carefully researched. The choreography was directed by Big Eagle, an Indian of Winnebago and Paiute parentage. The play's audience was impressed less with the complex and sentimental plot than with what the *New York Times* called its "splendid scenic display."[6] All this activity reflected a public hunger for information concerning the "real Indian" and further attracted American readers and writers to the red man.

Early Poet-Interpreters

Though in touch with the Indian-related literature of their times, most of the early poets who interpreted the Native American drew their inspiration from firsthand contact with

Indian peoples. Typically, this firsthand contact resulted from the chance circumstances of the poet's life. Austin, for instance, discovered the Paiute and Shoshone as neighbors in 1888 when she moved from Illinois to homestead with her mother in the California desert of Tejon County. John G. Neihardt established his first friendships with Plains peoples among the Omaha when he worked as a general factotum for J. J. Elkin, whom Neihardt later described as an "Indian skinner," trading with the reservation people near Neihardt's home in Bancroft, Nebraska. Lew Sarett worked his way through Northwestern University as a summer hunting and fishing guide around the Great Lakes, where he befriended and swapped stories and songs with many Chippewa. These three poets' formative contact with Indian peoples took place during the same turn-of-the-century years when Curtis was gathering materials for *The Indians' Book*. This coincidence is partially attributable to a general spirit in America of interest in the Indian and the related available literature but is more related to the Indians' sudden accessibility. They were *there,* nearby—domesticated on the reservation; at least partially acculturated; available; able, often anxious, to converse intelligently in English with genuinely friendly and interested whites. Once they discovered and befriended the Indian, these poets found, usually to their astonishment, a wealth of literary material. Most often it was revealed to them informally, in the normal course of relations. In a few instances sacred material normally kept secret from outsiders was revealed. Black Elk's sharing of his sacred vision with Neihardt is the most prominent example. This type of information was offered only after a deeply trusting and spiritual relationship had been established and was usually discussed within more formal, even ceremonial, circumstances that emphasized its high seriousness.

Poets such as Austin, Neihardt, Sarett, and others who came later regarded their fascination with the Indian as essential to their being and becoming American poets. These early poets were not interested in being literal translators. They could not have been even if they had wished to, for none possessed the knowledge of Indian languages that some ethnographers had.[7] They were interpreters, trying to bring over to our very different language and culture modes of expression and con-

sciousness that they felt could help Americans better understand Indians and, more important, themselves. The poems of these poet-interpreters tended to be freer translations than those of the ethnographers. Their allegiance was to what each poet conceived as the spirit rather than the letter of the originals. As Austin wrote,

> [I try] to saturate myself in the poem, in the life that produced it, and the environment that cradled that life, so that when the point of crystalization is reached, I myself give forth a poem which bears, I hope, a genetic resemblance to the song that was my point of contact.[8]

"Genetic resemblance" suggests a new creation of varying degrees of similarity to its parent—an apt description, as I shall demonstrate, of many of the poems that resulted. But it also suggests something of deeper significance: the desire of Austin and other twentieth-century poets for intimacy and kinship with the red man.

The Spiritual Connection

These early poets tell us that they were drawn to the Indian by a deep sense of spiritual affinity. Even before contact with Indian ways, Austin, Sarett, and Niehardt each possessed a somewhat mystical attitude toward the land. Austin and Neihardt derived theirs from powerful insights and visions in childhood;[9] Sarett's came from years of solitary camping and attention to nature and animals. This love and respect for the land helped to establish a special rapport with the Indian people they met. Austin writes in "The American Rhythm": "Better than I knew any Indian I knew the land they lived in. This I hold to be a prime requisite for understanding the originals of whatever description."[10]

Beginning, then, with such a feeling of kinship, the poets, not surprisingly, found themselves profoundly transformed by their contact with Native Americans. Austin and Neihardt are early examples of this phenomenon; Charles Olson and Jerome Rothenberg are more recent ones. Each emerged from a period of intense contact with Indians creatively renewed and committed to sharing the new attitudes and understand-

ings they had developed. In other instances that we shall discuss, such as in certain writings of Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams, poets with little intimate knowledge of Indians have nevertheless used them as a focal image of their own and, by implication, of other Americans' need for personal transformation. A desire for fuller spiritual awareness, including intimacy with the spirit of the land, is at the center of most of the works we shall consider here.

Such conversions are not merely to Indian themes and experiences, but to what I can only call "meaningfulness." This is a hard point to make clear. What I mean is that each of the poets considered here found in the red man's culture not merely a set of new things to talk about but also a healing and an explanation of his or her personal experience or of the American experience in general. Those who focused on Indian poetry and literature—particularly Austin, Olson, and Rothenberg—found themselves changing their approach to American poetics. And as always, a change in style implied a change of being.

In general, these and other poets in this century have turned to the Indian for a variety of reasons. Many have reacted against the limiting rationalism, scholasticism, and egocentrism that periodically pervade the practice of American verse, seeking in Indian poetry the renewing spiritual energy basic to all vital poetries. Some have sought in Indian materials a mythopoeic universe related to America, not to Europe or the Middle East. Others have sought in the holistic perspectives of Indian cultures and poetries a fuller sense of their own humanity, including a cure for the disease of psychological and spiritual alientation afflicting so many in the twentieth century. The Indian has been perceived as the key to the secrets of self and surroundings that have somehow eluded us. These essentially spiritual connections should not be underestimated, for they stand behind virtually all of the literary activity covered in this book.

Early Interpretations of Indian Poetry

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, "reexpressions" of Indian verse by American poets began to appear with increasing frequency in literary magazines, often

side by side with other early experiments with free verse. They coincided with the general literary interest in things Indian, but they also encountered the coexistent attitude of literary snobbishness and downright racism. Austin, for instance, found her re-expressions returned in 1904 by *The Atlantic,* which had previously published her work extensively, accompanied by an irritated note stating that "there was no excuse for this sort of thing." A year later, *The Century* sent others back with the message, as Austin recounted it, "that if I would admit that I had made them up myself, they would publish them as poetry, but never on the assumption they were Indian."[11] In the view of these publications, the "savage" Indian was incapable of poetry.

Resistance was based on poetic as well as racist grounds. Following the apparent lack of rhyme or regular metrics in most Indian originals (or at least in ethnologists' translations of them), poets' interpretations tended to be written in free verse. At the turn of the century, this practice represented a radical departure from conventional verse forms, one that only began to gain acceptance a decade or more later with the efforts of Ezra Pound, the imagists, and the *vers librists.* Between 1905 and 1915, however, more and more modern interpretations of Indian verse by Austin, Sarett, Alice Corbin Henderson, and others, including Carl Sandburg, began to appear in literary magazines such as *McClure's, The Forum, Scribner's, The Delineator, Everybody's, Sunset, Others,* and *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse. Poetry,* the most influential poetry journal of the day, brought this activity to a head with a February 1917 number, a special "aboriginal poetry issue."

Poetry's aboriginal issue included interpretations of Indian verse by Austin, Henderson, Skinner, Frank S. Gordon, and Edward Eastaway. All but Eastaway, a British soldier who had never been to America, had had direct contact with Indian peoples. The collection was fairly representative of the various types of poetry and interpretive modes with which American poets were experimenting. These ranged from Gordon's imitations of chants and dance songs to Austin's explanatory reworkings of a Navajo ceremonial text; from Skinner's dramatic monologues attributed to individual Native Americans to Henderson's elaborate imagist re-creations of some

cryptic magical charms, based on Frances Densmore's translations from Chippewa. More important, however, than its selection of individual poems was *Poetry's* implicit and explicit linking of Indian poetry with the concerns and practices of poetic modernism. Sandburg, who briefly ran along the fringes of this literary movement, made this linkage explicit in his extremely favorable review of Densmore's *Chippewa Music,* then only available in *Bulletins* nos. 45 and 53 of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. He emphasized the likeness between the Chippewa charms and the modern imagist poem. "Suspicion arises," Sandburg wrote with tongue in cheek, "that the red man and his children committed direct plagiarism on our modern imagists and vorticists." This review, along with editorial tribute to ethnologists Densmore, Voth, Matthews, Lyman, Simms, Grinnell, and Cushing, pointed to Indian poetry as a rich source for the modern poet and reader. Further, Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry,* went so far as to cite Cushing's translation of the *Creation Myth of the Zunis* as "a masterpiece of primitive song which should rank, and undoubtedly will rank, among the great epics of the world."[12]

Monroe, though not a generator of new views of poetry, had a knack for attracting them and a willingness to pass them on to the public through her magazine. Her support for imagism, free verse, and, later, objectivism is well known. Less well publicized is her long-standing interest in Indian cultures, the result of trips she made in 1901 and 1915 to the desert Southwest. There she visited the Pueblo tribes, the Grand Canyon, and the ancient Hopi "sky city" of Walpi where she witnessed the famous Snake Dance later described by D. H. Lawrence in *Mornings in Mexico.* Like other poets of the period who were attracted to the Indian, Monroe associated the Native American's poetry and ceremonial life with the land and considered them expressions of a spirit of place hardly available to white Americans. In a 1915 editorial in *Poetry* she wondered, "what would be the effect upon our art of those great heights and depths and spaces, those clear skies and living waters, those colors incredible and magnificent? For in spite of a few pioneers," she continued, "we have not yet taken possession of our inheritance, entered into its kingdom."[13] Monroe's impe-

rialistic language should not blind us to the significant sentiment she expresses, echoing as it does Old and New Testament references to the Promised Land and the new spiritual condition implied there. Coming to grips with America as a place with a spirit and character all its own was an artistic preoccupation of the period that, thoughout the century, has continued to be a central concern of poets attracted to the Indian. The red man, in effect, comes with the territory. We can find this concern for *place* in various arts between 1915 and 1930: in the painting of Georgia O'Keeffe and in the painting and writing of Marsden Hartley; in the magazine *Contact,* edited by William Carlos Williams; in the prose of Hamlin Garland, Waldo Frank, D. H. Lawrence, and the Sioux writer Luther Standing Bear; and in the poetry of Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, and many others. All these artists discovered in Indian people and their cultures a rich potential source of contact with a spirit of place that they sensed could lead to personal and artistic renewal. Unlike expatriate Americans like Pound, H. D., and Gertrude Stein, they sought modern alternatives, renewal, and roots by digging into America itself.

The First Anthology

One year after the appearance of *Poetry's* aboriginal issue, *Path on the Rainbow* (1918), edited by George W. Cronyn, appeared. Labeled by Austin in her introduction as "the first authoritative volume of aboriginal American verse," *Path* climaxed much of the preceding activity by gathering together many translations of Indian poems by both ethnologists and poets. It represents the first attempt to anthologize Indian poetry on its own, without an accompanying descriptive text; and though many anthologies have followed in the sixty years since its publication, *Path on the Rainbow,* still in print, remains one of the richest and most comprehensive.[14] *Path* contained more than 350 pages of translated poetry; the first and largest section consisted of 189 pages of ethnological translations, most of which had been previously published exclusively in scholarly journals. They were arranged in subsections designated Eastern Woodlands, Southeast, Great Plains, Southwest, California, Northwest Coast, and Far North to represent what Cronyn and

Austin believed to be distinct regional stylistic characteristics as well as the geographical distribution of America's tribal groups. These ethnological workings were followed by 150 pages of interpretations of Indian verse by the poets Constance Lindsay Skinner, Mary Austin, Frank S. Gordon, Alice Corbin Henderson, and a popular Canadian poet of Mohawk descent, Pauline Johnson. A third, 90-page section contained "The Hako: A Pawnee Ceremony." Translated by Alice Cunningham Fletcher, this included interpretive commentaries by Tahirussawichi, who is described as a *kuruhus* or head priest.

"The Hako" is a ceremonial song cycle made up of ninety-five different songs. These are framed within eighteen rituals, each of which is described in brief commentaries accompanying the text. "The Hako" is a celebration of the life force and the universal power and harmony inherent in it. Its purpose, as described by Fletcher in her original study, is to bring to certain individuals the "promise of children, long life, and plenty" and to bring friendship and peace to all those participating in the ceremony as well as to others belonging to different family clans and tribes.[15] The inclusion of "The Hako" in *Path on the Rainbow* served to suggest the rich ceremonial context of Indian poetry in general and to present an example of an extended Native American form. It made explicit for American readers the holistic awareness implicit in much of the shorter work.

A final eighteen-page section of *Path,* titled "Songs from the North and South," contained a selection of Densmore's translations from various tribes. It represented a tribute to this dedicated ethnologist, whom Austin in her introduction to *Path* singled out for her "great scholarship and penetrating insight, which have given her first place among students of Indian life." The total effect of the material collected in *Path on the Rainbow* was to reveal a rich Native American poetic tradition characterized by a broad range of styles, forms, and themes, as well as by an immense depth of spirit.

Path on the Rainbow *as a Contribution to American Poetry*

Path on the Rainbow attempted more than the resurrection of Native American poetry in response to a general literary interest in things Indian. Following the line of thought introduced

by *Poetry* (whose aboriginal poetry issue was credited by Cronyn as the inspiration for his anthology), *Path* presents in Austin's introduction the most forceful assertion to that date of Indian poetry's importance as a model and as a source for a new, uniquely American poetry. Austin wrote:

> Probably never before has it occurred that the intimate thought of a whole people should be known through its most personal medium to another people whose unavoidable destiny it is to carry that thought to fulfillment and make of that medium a characteristic literary vehicle.
>
> To those unaware until now of the very existence of such a body of aboriginal verse, this may seem a large claim. But unless the occasion has some such significance, this is no time to divert public attention to mere collections of literary curiosities. Arresting as single examples of it are, a greater interest still attaches to the relationship which seems about to develop between Indian verse and the ultimate literary destiny of America.

Austin did little to elaborate on this prophecy until *The American Rhythm* appeared five years later. She made clear, however, that her claim rested on the premise that all great national art developed its distinctive characteristic from the very land that nourished it; and that poetry was, as she wrote in the introduction to *Path,* "of all man's modes, the most responsive to natural environment, the most sensitive and truest record of his reactions to its skyey influences, its floods, forests, and morning colors." Indian poetry, she observed, give us the opportunity of "establishing some continuity with the earliest instances of such reaction." It provides us with a measure by which we can gauge whether or not the "American poetic genius has struck its native note."

Like American writers before and since, Austin noted a general psychological, spiritual, and literary alientation among her contempoaries from America itself, evident in an overdependence on forms and values that were not indigenous. At the same time, she sensed that "it becomes appropriate and important that this collection of American Indian verse should be brought to public notice at a time when the sole instinctive movement of the American people is for a deeper footing in their native soil." This tension between a feeling of fragmented

alienation, on the one hand, and a longing for unity with place and the consequent psychological and spiritual wholeness on the other, continues to be a moving force propelling readers and writers toward the Indian.

Indian Poetry and Imagism

Following Sandburg's lead, Austin, in her introduction to *Path on the Rainbow,* emphasized "the extraordinary likeness between much of this native product and the recent work of the Imagists, *vers librists,* and other literary fashionables." Such a proclamation was a way of bolstering her claim that Indian poetry had immediate relevance to the concerns and direction of modern American verse. These similarities are, in fact, superficial at best and more apparent than real. Austin was one of the first to write insightfully on the difficulties of translating material that, being from an oral tradition, differed fundamentally from what was then standard American poetry. The Indian languages themselves were often extremely different in structure and conceptual ways from English, and their images and symbols were culture-bound to a very great extent, as Austin well knew. Her emphasis reflects her promotional acumen more than her literary insight.

We can affirm these radical differences. However, when the translators used imagist concepts and techniques to produce their English translations, the results were bound to bear a striking resemblance to imagist forms. Two of Densmore's translations published in *Path on the Rainbow* can serve as examples:

"The Water Bug and the Shadows"

The water bug
  is drawing
  the shadows of the evening
  toward him on the water.

"The Deer and the Flower"

The deer
looks at the flower.

These poems, one from the Yuman and the other from the Yaqui of the Colorado River Valley, brought out of their original context into English and set in imagist lineation on the page, certainly seem to work in the way many imagist or haiku poems do. Both these poems express their perceptions through a direct relation of images. They have no explanatory or abstract verbiage. The effect of the stark juxtapositions has been heightened by the translator's careful use of line breaks, which separate and isolate each image. These accent the sense of movement from image to image as well as the suggestive power of each image as a thing in itself.[16] The continuity or wholeness is gained very simply: each poem is a simple sentence, and each image is a grammatical constituent of its sentence, isolated as a separate line in the poem, so the reader is made to focus successively and sharply on each aspect of the overall statement that is the poem-sentence. Further, the poem's meanings are not conveyed rationally; they are impressionistic and holistic—dependent on the evocative interaction of the individual, relational, and total images. In print these poems reflect strategies that are basic to the modern imagist and traditional haiku poems, but they are silent strategies, developed for the page, directed at the mind.

The originals on which these poems are based are not written. They are sounded, not silent. Their dimensions of music, movement, and relation are more complex, more physical, for they are literally embodied in their singers. The translation, because it shifts the ground of the poem from the media of the singer's body and voice to the medium of the page, can only provide, at best, the roughest equivalent of the original.

Further, the more we know about the Indian culture that is a given poem's source, the more likely we are to discover levels of meaning that are uniquely Native American. This can be illustrated by another Densmore translation that can be read as an imagist poem, the Winnebago "Healing Song," found in *Path on the Rainbow:*

> They are in close consultation
> with their heads together
> Wenabojo
> and his grandfather.

The translation's title might direct the Western reader to interpret this as a poem in which the healing of presumed differences is achieved by a meeting of minds, a reasoning together, between the opposing generation represented by Wenabojo and his grandfather. Such a reading, however, brings Western cultural assumptions to the poem, as *Path on the Rainbow's* lack of contextual notes invites us to do. A minimal knowledge of Winnebago culture, however, suggests that, in the original, the poem's metaphorical meanings are relatively minor. In its original context, "Healing Song" was not an aesthetic object; it literally was used to heal. Its power in this regard is partially derived from untranslated cultural associations attached to Wenabojo and his grandfather. To the Winnebago, these two are not mere men of opposing generations. They are supernatural beings, high among a pantheon of such figures, who are in this instance called upon to contribute their considerable energies to the medical/spiritual task at hand.

Besides these culture-specific figures, another vital source of power and meaning in "Healing Song" resides in its oral performance. It is chanted with monotonous repetition over a patient by a medicine man of the sacred Midewiwin Society, a person believed to have great personal power. He may wear a "false face" mask having spiritual connotations, make significant gestures with his hands, blow on his patient with his breath, or employ other devices and techniques. His use of repetition in chanting eventually subordinates the referential aspects of the words to their musical and rhythmic properties. The song's musical sound and movement, its hypnotizing repetitions, its accompanying acts and devices, cannot of course be easily and effectively represented in the translation. Nor can the translation convey the most important relational aspect of the poem, which is not that between Wenabojo and his grandfather but that between singer and patient. To the Indian, thus, the verbal content of the poem is only one part of its meaning.

As Austin writes in *Path's* introduction, "It is not the words which are potent, but the state of mind evoked by the singing." Indian poetry seeks to be effective, not merely affective. Most of the early interpreters, whether they were ethnologists or poets, recognized that the Indian poem's situa-

tional, referential, and cultural complexities were inseparable from the verbal content, that, in fact, these complexities were crucial to the song's being more than just words—to its being supermeaningful, so to speak—and the literary translators sought to bring as much as possible of such riches over into English. They were severely limited, however, by the printed page, the English language, and the very different associations and contexts of American culture. Austin's emphasis on their superficial similarities to imagism and free verse obscures the fact that there is usually more to these little Native American imagistic poems than, in bare translation, can possibly meet the Western eye.

Early Approaches to Interpretations by American Poets

American poets used various approaches to convey their sense of the elusive essence of Indian poetry to the reader of English. Alice Corbin Henderson, a close associate of Harriet Monroe, who coedited *Poetry* and the 1917 anthology *The New Poetry,* was one of the most widely published of these interpreters. She considered herself an imagist poet, and almost all of her Indian interpretations were reworkings of Densmore's translations. Her usual method was to begin with a phrase from the presumably literal Densmore version—an "Indian keynote" as Henderson called it—and expand from it with varying degrees of loyalty to the original.[17] Often the resulting poem bears little resemblance to the explicit or hidden meanings of the original.

For instance, a Densmore translation of a Chippewa song she calls "They Are Playing a Game" reads thus:

> The noise of passing feet
> on the prairie
> They are playing a game as they come
> Those men

In her accompanying commentary, Densmore provided the information that this was, in effect, a personal power song, occasioned during the return home of a Chippewa war party when one of its members sank exhausted to the ground. His

companions remained nearby to protect him from wandering enemies, and even though, as Densmore's informant reports, "it seemed impossible that he should rise, he used his medicine, and after a time sprung to his feet singing this song which he composed at the time. The war party resumed its journey and he accompanied them, still singing his new song."[18] Henderson, however, ignored all of this information as well as Densmore's note that "playing a game" was probably a reference to lacrosse. Henderson's "translation" reads:

> The noise of passing feet
> On the prairie—
> Is it men or gods
> Who come out of the silence?

Henderson used the imagistic "keynote" as a springboard for creating a completely new and different poem. The new poem seeks to enter the Indian world from the outside, not by presenting or elaborating the specific incident that prompted the highly understated and referential original, but by attempting to evoke the more general aura of the magical and supernatural world that the red man assumes as a given. Her "echoes" are not of the Chippewa original, but of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"—a classical allusion characteristic of the Georgian poetry being practiced from 1910 to 1920.

While this interpretation strays far afield, in others Henderson attempted to use available background information to elaborate and explain Densmore's cryptic originals. For instance, a Chippewa war dance titled "On the Bank of a Stream," translated by Densmore, reads in its entirety:

> Across the river
> They speak of me as being.

Densmore's commentary reveals that the song honors the warriors in a celebrated battle along a river bank with the Sioux. Her informant mentions the mournful wails of the Sioux women on the other side of the river.[19] Henderson retitled the poem, "Where the Fight Was"; she used the "keynote" phrase "across the river" along with the available information to build a new poem that imaginatively re-creates the story:

In the place where the fight was
  Across the river,
In the place where the fight was
  Across the river:
A heavy load for a woman
To lift in her blanket,
A heavy load for a woman
To carry on her shoulder.
In the place where the fight was
  Across the river,
In the place where the fight was
  Across the river:
The women go wailing
To gather the wounded
The women go wailing
To pick up the dead.

The new version shifts the focus from the Chippewa man's grim exultation to the Sioux women's lamentation. It uses a form heavily dependent on parallelisms and repetitions that, though characteristic of much Indian poetry, is radically different from the form of the original poem in this case. What results is a more moving poem in English, but it is a poem about Indians and not an Indian poem.

Oftentimes, however, interpreters' attempts to expand and explain Indian originals do not result in the desired improvement in English. Austin, for instance, reworked a Washoe song given to her by an informant known as Washoe Sam into a poem she called "Glyph":

A girl wearing a green ribbon—
as if it had been my girl.
—The green ribbon I gave her for a remembrance—
Knowing all the time it was not my girl,
Such was the magic of that ribbon,
Suddenly,
My girl existed inside me.

Actually, Sam's version in his own English, which he less pretentiously called "The Magic Ribbon," is considerably more concise and effective:

The Green ribbon,
When I saw a girl wearing it,
My girl existed inside me.[20]

In this form, the poem illustrates what Ezra Pound described as the imagist poem's attempt "to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective becomes inward and subjective."[21] Austin's version simply belabors the point and slows down the poem's perceptions while adding nothing essential to its meaning.

Interpreters tried similar clarifying and elaborating techniques on less obviously imagistic Indian works. Austin, for instance, reworked some of the incantatory mountain chants of the Navajo translated by Washington Matthews. Both versions of one, translated by Matthews as "Invocation to Dsilye N'eyeani" and by Austin as "Prayer to the Mountain Spirit," are found in *Path on the Rainbow*. Matthews's original reads:

Reared within the mountains
Lord of the Mountains!
Young Man!
Chieftain!
I have made your sacrifice.
I have prepared a smoke for you.
My feet restore thou for me.
My legs restore thou for me.
My mind restore thou for me.
My voice restore thou for me.
Restore all for me in beauty.
Make beautiful all that is before me.
Make beautiful all that is behind me.
It is done in beauty.
It is done in beauty.
It is done in beauty.
It is done in beauty.

In Matthews's version, the poem's content implicitly suggests its original ceremonial context as a healing chant. Specific ceremonial preparations are described and specific parts of the body to be restored to health are named. The importance to the Navajo of the concept "beauty" is evident by its prominence

and repetition in the poem. The song is one of many songs within one of many cycles in what the Navajo call the "Beauty Way." Its purpose is to correct illness by addressing what are perceived as its root causes: a lack of inner harmony and a lack of harmony with the surrounding universe. The chants and their accompanying ritual and medical activities attempt to restore the patient to the essential harmony of life, the "Beauty Way." Austin, in trying to make the song more understandable to the white reader as a prayer, deleted and diluted much of this meaning:

Lord of the Mountain.
Reared within the Mountain.
Young Man, Chieftain,
Hear a young man's prayer!

Hear a prayer for cleanness.
Keeper of the strong rain.
Drumming on the mountain,
Lord of the small rain
That restores the earth in newness,
Keeper of the clean rain,
Hear a prayer for wholeness.

Young Man, Chieftain,
Hear a prayer for fleetness.
Keeper of the deer's way,
Reared among the eagles,
Clear my feet of slothness.
Keeper of the paths of men,
Hear a prayer for straightness.

Hear a prayer for braveness.
Lord of the thin peaks,
Reared amid the thunders,
Keeper of the headlands
That uphold the earth in harvest,
Keeper of the strong rocks,
Hear a prayer for staunchness.

Young Man, Chieftain!
Spirit of the Mountain!

Stylistically, Austin's version dilutes the urgency of the original's repetitions. They become more deliberate parallelisms,

resulting in a distinct reduction of energy and a shift of tone. She omitted the precise namings of physical parts to be healed, substituting for their specific supplications more abstract descriptive terms like "cleanness," "staunchness," and "wholeness." These choices deemphasize the poem's ceremonial quality; they involve the loss of the process of centering and locating the patient in a universe restored to harmony and balance ("Make beautiful all that is before me / Make beautiful all that is behind me") as well as the loss of the ritual repetitions of the refrain "It is done in beauty" the sacred four times.

Austin interpreted the chant as a prayer in the Western sense. But in so doing she lost its original senses of immediacy and sympathetic magic that Matthews's original, more literal translation conveys. Her version is not all bad. It adds information, for instance, about the attributes of the spirit who is being invoked and some lines in the second stanza that convey the vital importance of rain to the Navajo; this passage also suggests the fine distinctions that their language can make about its various types. All in all, however, though her more abstract and deliberate version may be more conceptually understandable to the white reader, much of the original's intellectual and spiritual content has been sacrificed. The poem's form has been altered, its energy and specificity reduced, its most important philosophical term, "Beauty," deleted. It is a very different work from the one on which it is based.

These differences between the translations and interpretations illustrate some of the special difficulties associated with bringing Native American oral poetry to the Western printed page. As William Bevis has written:

> The degree to which a text should be liberated by poetic license depends a good deal on the use to be made of the result. Does the translator seek, at one extreme, to compose excellent poems in English, or at the other, to document some aspect of a foreign art form? A single translation of strange material seldom suits both purposes. Indian poetry translations fall all along this scale of intentions, and a single translation often evolves through different stages of use.[22]

Though it is arguable whether the early free interpreters of Indian poetry succeeded in producing excellent poems in

English, that was their intent. They were seeking ways of enriching American poetry by allowing it to enter the Indian world that, it should be emphasized, meant to most of them gaining fuller access to the world of America itself. In translating, they were inevitably faced with the unenviable choice of sacrificing the content in favor of preserving the form, or of sacrificing the original form to bring out the hidden content. Austin chose the latter course, admitting, "In my own interpretations I have been feeling rather for a full expression of Indian thought, than for lyric quality."[23] The problem is that in the Indian world the two are not easily separated—a fact that may be true of most poetries but is especially so with works composed within an oral tradition.

Other interpreters whose work is included in *Path on the Rainbow* displayed different approaches to entering the Indian's poetic world. In his poems, Frank S. Gordon sought to represent the very lyric energy of southwestern tribal chants that Austin sacrificed. His poems retain the insistent repetitions and include exclamatory interjections and occasional Indian words to heighten the reader's sense of the originals' Indian-ness, so that these poems tend to come across as more foreign and exotic than the works of other interpreters. Constance Lindsay Skinner wrote imaginative dramatic monologues from an Indian viewpoint. Her poems are based largely on childhood experience; she had frequently accompanied her father, a Canadian government official, on his visits to tribes of the Pacific Northwest. These translations tend to describe typically Indian domestic activities, but they are not at all Indian in lyric quality or form. The interpretations of the popular Canadian poet Pauline Johnson, the one interpreter of Native American ancestry (she was known as "the Mohawk warbler") are, ironically, the most traditionally Western and the least Indian in both content and form. Poems such as "The Lost Lagoon" and "Song My Paddle Sings" might have provided an appropriate lyrical score for Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald in the film *Indian Love Song,* for like the movie they are excessively romantic and have little to do with actual Native American modes of life and expression. They are justifiably ridiculed by critic Louis Untermeyer as "rhymed sweetmeats" and "sentimental jinglings." *Path's* editor, Cronyn, publicly

blamed his publisher for insisting on Johnson's inclusion to boost the book's commercial appeal. Cronyn lamented that Johnson's poems "show how far the Indian poet strays from her own primitive tribal songs, when attempting the White Man's mode."[24]

Characteristics of Indian Poetry

Path on the Rainbow, with its broad selection of ethnological and interpretive translations, illustrated many of the characteristic types of Native American occasional songs: the healing song, war song, ceremonial song cycle, love charm, dance song, hunting song, and so on. Austin's introduction pointed to the magical applications of these songs. The collection also illustrated the most prominent characteristics of style and motive of the Indian poem. Critical discussions of these characteristics began with Austin's introduction to *Path on the Rainbow* and have continued to evolve in commentaries found mostly in the steady trickle of anthologies that have appeared throughout the century. The most prominent of such sources are Austin's *The American Rhythm* (1923, reissued in expanded form in 1930); Nellie Barnes's "American Indian Verse: Characteristics of Style" (1921), and her *American Indian Love Lyrics and Other Verse* (1925); Eda Lou Walton and T. T. Waterman's "American Indian Poetry" *(American Anthropologist,* 1925); Herbert Joseph Spinden's *Songs of the Tewa* (1933); Ruth Underhill's *Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona* (1938); Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent: An Anthology of American Indian Prose and Poetry* (1946); A. Grove Day's *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* (1951); and a spate of collections beginning in the late sixties, including Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* (1969) and *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972); William Brandon's *The Magic World* (1971); Dennis Tedlock's *Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians* (1972); John Bierhorst's *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature* (1974); Abraham Chapman's anthology (including critical commentaries) *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations* (1975); and Geary Hobson's *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (1979). Taken together, these

and other similar works comprise a body of criticism supporting Austin's assertion in *Path on the Rainbow* that Indian poetry has important contributions for America's literary and spiritual life. "I know of no task," Austin had written, "so salutary to the poet who would, first of all, put himself in touch with the resident genius of his own land."

What are the characteristics of the poetry of this "resident genius"? Barnes, in her pioneering 1921 study, *American Indian Verse,* defined the most important shaping force of Indian poetry as "the cosmic motive." This represents the Native American's "spirit of constant aspiration" to penetrate and become harmonious with the mysteries of the universe. The sense of harmony sought and often established in ceremony and song give the Indian and his poetry, Barnes wrote, a "consciousness of personal worth in the great scheme of life." Unlike much English verse, traditional Indian poetry is rarely tragic or sad. Instead, as Barnes observed, it is characterized by affirmation. Even the songs of the Ghost Dance religion of the late nineteenth century, composed in response to an unbearable situation—the destruction of Plains culture by military defeat, and eradication of the buffalo, and reservation life's subsequent dependency on the American government—are visionary charms that attempt to restore harmony and coherence to a broken world by affirmative poetic assertion. Such affirmation, Barnes wrote, "was the basis of achievement and cure among many scattered tribes."[25] Related ideas about the basic cultural role of Native American poetry are developed further in the eloquent and oft-anthologized essay by Paula Gunn Allen (herself part Laguna), "The Sacred Hoop," published most recently in *The Remembered Earth.* Allen suggested some of the central differences between the assumptions of the aspiring and affirmative Indian poetry and poetry in the Western tradition:

> The purpose of Native American literature is never one of pure self-expression. The "private soul at any public wall" is a concept that is so alien to native thought as to constitute an absurdity. The tribes do not celebrate an individual's ability to feel emotion, for it is assumed that all people are able to do so, making expression of this basic ability arrogant, presumptuous, and gratuitous. Besides, one's emotions are one's own: to suggest that

> another should imitate them is an imposition on the personal integrity of others. The tribes seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and share reality . . . to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity. The artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for in language we seek to share in the communal awareness of the tribe. In this art the greater self and all-that-is are blended into a harmonious whole, and in this way the concept of being that is the fundamental and sacred spring of life is given voice and being for all. The Indian does not content himself with simple preachments of this truth, but through the sacred power of utterance he seeks to shape and mold, to direct and determine the forces that surround and govern our lives and that of all things.[26]

The fundamental intention of most Indian poetry, to make and shape the world through the power and magic of the word, creates its style. What commentators have pointed to as its most pronounced stylistic characteristics—repetition, brevity based on imagistic and symbolic usages, and special rather than ordinary diction—all have strong magical associations. Virtually all commentators concur with Barnes's early observation that repetition is the most striking feature of Indian style. In *Path on the Rainbow* one finds both repetitions and partial repetition of individual words, lines, passages, and entire songs. We have already briefly discussed the magical repetitive chanting in the Winnebago "Healing Song." Essentially, repetition in Indian cultures, as Allen wrote,

> has an entrancing effect. Its regular recurrence creates a state of consciousness best described as "oceanic." It is hypnotic. . . . The individual's attention must become diffused. The distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest, so that the larger awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. In this way the person becomes literally "one with the Universe," for the individual loses consciousness of mere individuality and shares the quality of consciousness that characterizes most orders of being.[27]

By establishing such a consciousness of oneness, repetition creates holistic awareness. The effects are, of course, more pronounced within the context of ceremony and ceremonial dance, where repetitive movements and rhythms become reinforcing factors to the verbal repetition. Repetition, as we have said, is basic to the very brief charm, which Northrop Frye described as "the hypnotic incantation that, through its pulsing dance rhythms, appeals to involuntary physical response, and is hence not far from the sense of magic or physically compelling power."[28] Repetition is also fundamental in longer magical incantations like those of the Navajo Beauty Way song cycles. Further, Astrov observed that repetition is the dominant mode of expression not only in poetry but also in Indian storytelling and dance, as well as in domestic arts like pottery, basketry, and textile design. "Repetition, verbal and otherwise," she wrote, "means accumulation of power."[29] To the Native American, repetition is an a priori principle of the universe, evident everywhere in familiar patterns of nature and time. It is a power that man, as an intelligent part of the universe, can harness and use.

A second prominent stylistic characteristic of Indian poetry, often cited by commentators, is its characteristic brevity. Given the current literary interest in imagism, Austin and others made much of its apparent resemblance to much Indian poetry. Although an effective way to promote the newly anthologized Native American translations and interpretations, this comparison tended to obscure the essentially linguistic and magical sources of the symbolic images and phrasings largely responsible for the conciseness of the Indian expression. Curtis had called attention to these in *The Indians' Book:*

> One word may be the symbol of a complete idea that, in English, would need a whole sentence for its expression. Even those who know the language may not understand the songs unless they know what meaning lies behind the symbolic words . . . where songs belong to sacred ceremonies or secret societies, the meaning is purposely hidden—a holy mystery enshrined—that only the initiated may hear and understand.[30]

Barnes, in her prioneering study, enumerated many of the most prominent pan-tribal symbolic images along with their magi-

cal associations: Lightning and snakes, for instance, are associated with regeneration, the morning star and the eagle with divine wisdom and intelligence, the whirlwind with a transforming cosmic energy, and so on. Such magical symbols are everywhere in Indian life because all things are seen as intelligent and related, and as physically and spiritually alive. As the twentieth-century Sioux medicine man, Lame Deer (John Fire), put it:

> We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our minds are mixed up with the spiritual. We see in the world around us many symbols which teach us the meaning of life. . . . We Indians live in a world where the spiritual and the commonplace are one.[31]

The Indian use of symbols is complex, for it is not purely referential or emotive. Symbolic usages, to the Native American, have a level of meaning that is quite tangible and real. Coyote is both the crafty scavenger in the bush and the super-but-all-too-human trickster figure, creator, or demiurge of Native American tribal myth. Allen wrote that "symbols in Native American tribal myth are not symbolic in the usual sense of the term. The words articulate reality—not 'psychological' . . . reality, not emotive reality captured metaphorically in an attempt to fuse thought and feeling but that reality where thought and feeling are one, . . . where speaker and listener are one, where sound and sense are one."[32] Symbolic usages in Native American poetry thus help to enact the magic that is already perceived as ever-present in the world. They fuse the personal consciousness with the communal one, shaping communion and the integrative process at the heart of Indian ceremonialism.

A third stylistic quality cited by Barnes and other commentators is the poetic language often found in Indian poetry. This language differs markedly from that of ordinary speech. It can involve archaic words whose meaning is known, archaic words whose precise meaning is not known but whose sound is believed to retain the original magical power, and distortions of common words that, along with vocables, or meaningless sound syllables, are employed for their emotive effects and to fill out a rhythmic measure. Barnes's phrase

"poetic language" is misleading, for such usages do not represent heightened language in a purely literary or aesthetic sense. As R. F. Fortune wrote, much tribal song is characterized by "a secret esoteric language, a language of power." Anthropologists like Fortune and Bronislaw Malinowski regard devices like archaisms, vocables, and word distortions in a tribal context as elements of magic language, which, as Malinowski wrote, is "primeval langauge, and naturally it is different from the language of everyday speech; it is 'true speech,' distinct from the way we talk."[33]

The characteristics found in Indian poetry are not unique to the literature of Native American cultures. Repetition, imagism, dense symbolism, and special linguistic modes are basic to the poetries of both the preliterate and literate worlds. Their magical usages in Indian cultures are, of course, alien to us today, though we are beginning to understand how our own poetry is rooted in such "primitive" practices.[34] Indian poetry's association with integration of the self and with personal and even group communion is, however, becoming less alien to contemporary uses of poetry.

In the twentieth century, poets have turned increasingly to nonlinear, incantatory modes. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and *Kaddish*, for instance, two of the most widely read English-language poems of the past quarter-century, are structured on the very repetitive patterns central to tribal poetry. Imagism, dadaism, surrealism, symbolist poetry, projective verse, and performance poetry are all twentieth-century approaches that have moved modern poetry out of predictable linear patterns into more spatial, incantatory, imagistic, or holistic ones. Some of the poets practicing these techniques recognize, acknowledge, and draw on tribal sources while many, caught up in the avant-garde aspects of modernism, do not. Such adaptations of ancient practices are hardly limited to poetry. One has only to explore the impact of African and Oceanic art on Picasso and other painters at the turn of the century, or of tribal dance on Isadora Duncan, to realize that the renewing influence of the primitive has extended beyond poetry and has affected many facets of twentieth-century art.

This discussion is not primarily intended as an evaluation of the work of the earliest interpreters of Indian poetry.

Rather, I have mainly tried to demonstrate the characteristics and the appeal of Indian poetry and to record that several poets and editors understood their interest in Indian poetry not as antiquarianism, but as a vital concern with the development of a new American poetry that could speak in ways that would serve the literary and spiritual needs of modern America. None of them understood or articulated this better than Mary Austin.

Austin's "The American Rhythm"

In 1923 Austin published *The American Rhythm,* a collection of her reexpressions of the poetry of various Indian tribes. In a long introductory essay of the same title that outlined her views on the significance of Indian poetry for modern American verse, Austin followed the lead of Louise Pound and other contemporaries by tracing the origins of poetry back to the tribal dance, where rhythm, movement, and sound were combined to pursue the impulse toward "a reconciliation with the allness through group communion." Indian ceremonialism and its poetry are thus likened to early Greek dance, the acknowledged root of Western poetry and drama.

Austin's central premise is that "all verse forms that are found worthy of the use of great poets are aboriginal, in the sense that they are developed from the native soil that produced them." The prophecy that follows from this is "that American poetry must inevitably take, at some period of its history, the mold of Amerind verse, which is the mold of American experience shaped by the American environment."[35]

Austin provides a broad overview of the English poetic tradition that America inherited. Her analysis holds that English poetry lost much of its own aboriginal energy at an early point in its history owing to corruption of its original communal function by priestly, aristocratic, and military castes. Poetry became the property of these groups; the common people were left with the folk ballad. Subsequently, English poetry hardened into fixed metrical forms that incorporated nonindigenous influences from Greek, Roman, and Hebrew verse, making it more accessible to educated classes than to commoners. In Austin's analysis, America's democratic social structure protected it against the unfolding of a similar

pattern. She asserted that Native American poetry represented a useful model and source for American poetry in several ways. First, it was "a form as lacking in tradition as the American experiment itself." By this Austin did not mean that Indian poetry lacked tradition, but that it was not rigidly locked into the past and, like democracy, was open to individual innovation and self-renewing change. Second, it was, in her view, "democratic in the sense that it was within the capacity of the democratically bred. Anybody could use it." Third, Indian poetry represented to her "a statement of life as . . . life presented itself on the western continent, in terms of things lived rather than observed or studied." Indian poetry was a model that encouraged poets to "represent the rhythm of men attempting to move concertedly from their own base, rather than to be waved forward by the batons of kings and academies."

Austin likened American Indian poetry to the modern free-verse movement just coming into its own. She claimed "never to have met an Indian with the slightest disposition to force words into a predetermined mold."[36] This view differed radically from the observations of students of Indian song like Densmore, who believed that preexisting melodic patterns often dictated the shape of accompanying poetic langauge Nevertheless, it was the kind of half-truth that, like Austin's comments on imagism and Indian poetry, represented good promotion—an attempt to call attention to the immediate literary relevance of the rich Native American poetic heritage.

Austin analyzed the rhythmic sources of Indian poetry and used her analysis to establish what she felt should be the basis of the modern American free-verse poem. She recognized that the sources of poetic rhythm were necessarily complex. Essentially, she felt that Indian poetry was the expression of free individuals living in harmonious relationship with their own environment, physicality, labor, and heritage. Intimacy with the surrounding American landscape was central to her conception of both the old and new American poetry. She named this poetry the "landscape line," calling attention to the "streams of rhythmic sights and sounds" of a natural environment, which she believed contributed importantly to regional styles among American tribes. Austin had first been struck by the importance of this environmental influence when

an Indian friend pointed out how the rising and falling patterns of the wind were expressed in the movements, rhythms, and fluctuating vocal intensity of the participants in a ceremonial dance they were observing. Later she claimed to be able to identify the regional sources of Indian songs in unfamiliar languages simply by listening to them on phonograph recordings and analyzing their rhythmic patterns.

Austin believed that environmental rhythmic patterns became ingrained in the physiology of the person who was attuned to them:

> the rhythmic forms to which the environment gives rise seem to pass through the autonomic system, into and out of the subconscious without our having once become intellectually aware of them. Rhythm, then, in so far as it affects our poetic mode, has nothing to do with the intellectual life.[37]

Dissociating poetic rhythm from predetermined forms imposed by the mind and by convention was central to Austin's theory. By calling attention to the importance of the environment or "landscape" in the development of an indigenous American poetry, she made an association that other poets have developed. Though few, if any, have talked as explicitly as Austin does of landscape as a source of rhythm, the theme of intimacy with the local environment as a basis of American identity and poetry is prominent in the works of a long line of modern poets, including Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Charles Olson.

A second nonintellectual, "natural" source of poetic rhythm stressed by Austin was the body itself. She defined the landscape line as "the line shaped by its own inner necessity." That definition sought to call attention to a complex of factors: the landscape, the relationships between words and rhythms in the internal life of the poem itself, and the rhythms inside the poet out of which the poem arises. A poem essentially, Austin asserted, emerges and is shaped by the bodily rhythms of the individual man or woman—from "the breath, the *lub*-dub, *lub*-dub of the heart," the various imperceptible rhythms of

the central nervous system—where the psychic and emotional life of the individual are registered.

Related to the physical and environmental sources are what Austin called the "characteristic motor responses." This phrase refers to common work or dance rhythms that, through repetition, are ingrained in the body. She cited Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as an expression of American poetic genius for its success in capturing the rhythms of the rail splitter, a "characteristic motor response" of Lincoln's own life and region.

A final influence on poetic rhythm suggested by Austin is human heredity itself. Specific rhythmic patterns and preferences, she speculated, may be passed on genetically. Poetic composition is thus holistic, the result of a complex of rhythmic forces. Austin described it as "the orchestration of organic rhythms under the influence of associated motor and emotional responses recapitulated from generation to generation."[38] The key term in this description is *organic*. American poetry, she said, must not be based on forms preestablished and imposed by the mind alone; it must grow out of the natural, organic rhythms surrounding and within the individual at the time of composition. Like Indian ceremonialism it must strive for "the binding up of the body and the self in its expressiveness." Such a poetry requires poets who are sensitive to their inner lives and to their environment, who are living not just in their minds, but holistically, where they are, in the world.

"The American Rhythm" prophesied that the poet's relationship to the American environment and to his or her own physicality would become important shaping forces of the modern American poem. Indications that such a process was already beginning, Austin observed, were evident in the works of contemporaries. She saw Vachel Lindsay's work as sometimes drawing on popular song and dance rhythms and at other times as expressing "points of simultaneity with the rhythms of all deep forested river bottom lands in which the Mississippi and Congo have place and kinship."[39] In Carl Sandburg's poems in *Smoke and Steel* (1922) she heard the rhythms of modern industry native to his city of Chicago. In Sherwood Anderson's poems she detected "characteristic cornland movements" strikingly similar to corn-dance rhythms of southwestern Indian tribes.

Austin also predicted that American poetry would develop forms suitable to restoring the communal experience she observed in Native American cultures and believed to be at the heart of the poetic impulse. This process of restoration, like the use of landscape and physical rhythms, she sensed had already begun:

> Although we have not yet achieved the communality into which the Amerind has entered by easy evolution, there is evident striving for it in the work of such men as Masters, Frost, and Sandburg; all our recent poetic literature is touched with a profound nostalgia for these happy states of reconciliation with the Allness, which is the business of poetry to promote.[40]

Austin understood that American Indian culture and poetry offered more than literary models to the modern American poet. Her own experience had taught her that entering the Indian world through Native American poetry could lead to an expanded awareness, a more fulfilled sense of self through a holistic understanding of life. "The Indian sees no better than the white man," Austin wrote, "but he sees more, registers with every sense, some of which have atrophied in us, infinitely more."[41] Austin suggests that knowledge of the Indian can help Americans restore themselves to psychic and perceptual wholeness. "The American Rhythm" called attention to Native American cultures as sources of expanded human awareness, of poetry that reflected unity of body and mind and a sense of the unity of the inner and outer realities. Austin introduced important themes—intimacy with the American environment, open-form poetry based on the organic rhythms of the body, communality, and holistic awareness—that other poets interested in the Indian and concerned with issues of American poetry and identity were to develop.

Critical Responses

Path on the Rainbow and *The American Rhythm* drew mixed critical responses. The fact that these works represented the culmination of literary activity that had been enthusiastically supported by *Poetry,* the most influential and modern of American poetry journals, lent weight to Austin's claim in both

books that Indian poetry was of crucial importance to American mainstream literature and insured that there would be a critical response. Most critics were politely positive in a general way toward the poetry but were neutral or skeptical toward Austin's grandiose claims for its place in a wider literary tradition. Lewis Mumford wrote in *The New Republic* that "Mrs. Austin's work is as important as it is vigorous and wise," but he qualified his praise with the comment that "it is easier to accept Mrs. Austin's general thesis than it is to follow her particular illustrations.[42] R. M. Allen similarly damned with faint praise, observing in *The Literary Review,* "There may be more in Mrs. Austin's theories than she has taken the time to make clear."[43] Comments like these reflect on Austin's curious prose style in "The American Rhythm," a style that she herself acknowledged was afflicted with "a habit of doubling an idea back into its verbal envelope so that only the two ends of it stick out."[44] Earlier critics seized on the more obvious defects of *Path on the Rainbow:* Pauline Johnson's poems; the mislabeling of Carl Sandburg's poem "Early Moon" as a translation; Austin's apparent obliviousness to the fact that "The Marriage Song of Tikaens," which she described as a masterpiece of Indian literature, was a notorious forgery that had been exposed as a hoax by Daniel G. Brinton thirty years earlier. The most negative reviews came from Louis Untermeyer and Carl Van Doren, critics who were not fully comfortable with the inroads made by imagism and free verse and who were even less comfortable with Austin's claims for these as forms of an indigenous American classicism. Austin's promotion of Indian poetry as a model for a new American poetry rooted in place, body, and communality represented a threat to the rationalism, intellectualism, and elitism of the Western tradition that these critics represented and defended. Untermeyer attacked "the arbitrary arrangement of words and a pretentious typography that is foreign to our nature—though it is native to Ezra Pound, H. D., and Richard Aldington." Such imagist-like poems, he concluded, only proved that "the harsh aborigine can commit poetry as trite and banal as many an overcivilized paleface."[45]

Untermeyer's response prompted an acrimonious debate carried on for six months on the letters page of *The Dial.* Austin

and Cronyn defended their position that, as Austin wrote, *"vers libre* and Imagism are in truth primitive forms, and both of them generically American forms, forms instinctively created by people living in America and freed of outside influences." Untermeyer expanded his attack, pointing to the need for footnotes to clarify contexts and meanings of Indian translations, a criticism that Austin conceded had some validity but claimed was impractical to implement for commercial reasons.[46] Untermeyer responded to a crude personal attack by Cronyn[47] with a tasteless racist remark, ridiculing what he characterized as Austin's and Cronyn's proposition that "a good Indian . . . is not so much a dead Indian as a singing Indian." But despite his antipathy to the idea of the Indian as poet and to the implications of Austin's large claims for the red man's poetry, Untermeyer conceded that as "an ethnic document this anthology is of indubitable value; as a contribution to creative Americana it may grow to have importance."[48] A decade later, in *American Poetry from the Beginning to Whitman* (1931), Untermeyer had come round to Austin's view to the extent of including a review of the history and style of Indian poetry in a discussion of the origins of American poetry.

Regarding Untermeyer's comments on *Path on the Rainbow,* Austin complained, "If Mr. Untermeyer could get his mind off the Indian anthology as a thing of type and paper, he might have gotten more out of it."[49] The comment unwittingly points to the paradoxical problem of translating, and in the process transforming, oral poetry to "a thing of type and paper." Untermeyer, a self-described "mere man of letters," could take the poetry no other way. Austin never fully came to grips with the need to find a way to bring poetry off the page, to meet the underlying challenge posed by Indian poetics, that of integrating that poetry and the emerging American poetry more totally into the wider culture. Nor did she fully come to grips with the quasi-ritual attempts to combine poetry and music in public readings by her contemporaries Lindsay, Sandburg, and Sarett. Though Austin recognized a general spirit of communality in their work, she never specified the importance of performance poetry in serving this end.

The most enthusiastic response to Austin's and Cronyn's work came in *The Nation,* from Hartley Burr Alexander, him-

self a student of Indian cultures and their literature.[50] Unlik Untermeyer, Alexander recognized that "Cronyn's anthology must be appreciated in the fullness of the imagination and with unrestrained sensibility. The Indian," he continued, "makes no concession [to] the audience; it is either with him totally or not at all. But being with him, it will surely discover its reward in the directness and intensity of the imaginative experience."[51]

The two poles of response to Indian poetry and the claims made for it by Austin were sensitive to its radical implications for American poetry and identity. The conservative, defensive view was represented by Untermeyer; by John Gould Fletcher, who criticized Austin's "lack [of] a sense of proportion";[52] and by Carl Van Doren, who wrote, somewhat hysterically, that Austin "is ready to sacrifice all that we have for the sake of something we might have if we saw poetry and America the way she sees them . . . she is ruthless and would destroy a great deal of value."[53] The opposite view was expressed by Alexander: "we are coming to see that the lore of the Indian contains much that is a treasure for our inner life."[54] Later poets and critics were often to take sides, lining up behind one or the other of these aesthetic positions, both of which were concerned with establishing the roots of American identity. The conservatives linked American identity to a historical relationship with Europe and the Western tradition, a linear, chronological relationship resting on the axis of time. The radicals saw the meaning of America as being dependent on its break from Europe. For them, American identity was most importantly related to experiencing and creating "the New World." Toward this end, the Native American was regarded as a resource and a relative. Identity for the radicals thus rested no longer primarily on linear time but on space. We could only understand who we are, they sensed, by knowing fully where we are.