CHAPTER III

THE NATIVE AMERICAN POETIC VISION:
CONTOURS OF APPRECIATION

*When I tell these stories do you picture it, or do you just write it down?* - Zuni informant to Dennis Tedlock.

**The Dialectics of Translation**

Any approach to Native American oral literature developed by others must begin from the realisation that access is possible only through transcribers and translators, for as Arnold Krupat acknowledges "...it has always been, and unfortunately, remains the case -with, to be sure, significant exceptions - that a majority of the literary critics of Indian literatures, myself included, have little or no competence in Indian languages" (Krupat1992: 176). This makes the written text indispensable for any critical analysis of native oral literature. And if texts are needed, "then the trustworthiness of the available translations is, as Dell Hymes has pointed out in detail, a matter of considerable importance ... the accuracy of translations is a matter of major concern..."(ibid: 178). Thus the imperative is to define good translation. Krupat’s idea of good translation is that “... English translations of non-English poetries ought to reflect the style of the original even at the expense of looking or sounding odd in English” (ibid: 195), a notion
consistent with Robert Brightman's requirement of "some control of the original language from which the English translation is rendered, and an explicit specification of the syntactic, semantic, lexical, prosodic, or other parallelisms that are used to delimit the text into lines and/or more inclusive units of poetic measure" (ibid: 195). At the other end of the spectrum is the view that good translation "privilege the translator's ability to rise above the fidelity to the letter of the original's style in the interest of capturing its 'essence' or 'spirit'" (ibid: 195).

In another crucial observation Krupat goes on to note that 'bad' translation can be potentially 'good' criticism thus establishing the ground that translation by itself is an act of criticism. He finds in the early practice of translating Native American literature into English, some sort of critical practice that can lead to an 'ethnocriticism' of Native American literature. He is "thinking of those moments in the history of translations when the intentions of poet-translators from the dominant culture more nearly seemed to approach the intentions of Indian performers . . . these might be examined for another indirect route toward an ethnocriticism of Native American literatures" (ibid: 195).

Krupat's idea of translation as criticism is reflected in the translation practice of Jerome Rothenberg, who "mediates idealist and materialist concerns, paying at least some measure of attention to 'syntactic, semantic, lexical, prosodic' elements of the original, while feeling quite unconstrained to cut loose from those elements in search of the essentially . . . 'poetic' dimension of the original".
According to Krupat, “the kind of criticism Rothenberg’s ‘ethnopoetic’ translation perform is about the nearest approximation to anything . . . of an ethnocritical practice for Native American literature already in place” (ibid: 195).

**Total translation**

Rothenberg outlining his agenda for ‘total translation’, calls it “an experiment in the presentation of American Indian Poetry” (Rothenberg1975: 292-307). Declaring that he could indeed ‘internalize’ the ‘matter’ of his experiment, a primary requisite, the first ‘big question’ he faced was “if & how to handle those elements in the original works that weren’t translatable literally”:

As with most Indian poetry, the voice carried many sounds that weren’t, strictly speaking, “words.” These tended to disappear or be attenuated in translation, as if they weren’t really there. But they were there & were at least as important as the words themselves. In both Navaho &Seneca many songs consisted of nothing but those “meaningless” vocables (not free “scat” either but fixed sounds recurring from performance to performance). Most other songs had both meaningful & non-meaningful elements, & were often spoken of qua title, by their meaningless burdens. Similar meaningless sounds, Dell Hymes has pointed out for some Kwakiutl songs, might in fact be keys to the songs’ structure: “something usually disregarded, the refrain or so-called ‘nonsense syllables’ . . . in fact of fundamental importance . . . both structural clue and microcosm”(ibid: 293-294).

Rothenberg illustrate his point with a Navajo example from Frank Mitchell’s Seventeen Horse songs. In the first line of the opening song, the transcription reads as follows:
Dzo-wowode sileye shi, dza-na desileye shiyi, dzanadi sileye shiya’e

But the same segment given “as spoken” reads:

Dzaadi sila shi dzaadi sila shi dzaadi sila shi

The “spoken” segment translates as “over-here it-is-there (&) mine” which is repeated three times which means the same as the transcription of the opening line. Thus translated only for meaning one gets a three-fold repetition of “an unchanging single statement: but in the Navaho each time it’s delivered there’s a sharp departure from the spoken form: thus three distinct sound-events, not one in triplicate” (ibid: 294). Rothenberg set his aim as to respond to all the sound he is made aware of, and to let that awareness touch off responses or events in the English. His aim was not to set English words to Indian music, “but to respond poem-for-poem in the attempt to work out a “total” translation – not only of the words but of all sounds connected with the poem, including finally the music itself” (ibid: 294).

Translation to Rothenberg is a way of reporting of what he had experienced of the ‘other’s situation’, a truth that faithfully reflects his experience and ‘image of the life & thought of the source’. Citing his experience with the Senecas as an important illustration of the point, he goes on to declare that he let his collective experience with the Senecas serve as a “. . . cue: to let my moves be directed by a sense of the songs & of the attitude surrounding them” (ibid: 295). Rothenberg accords importance to his native bilingual informants, with whom he is “joined in English” (ibid: 295), and finds it convenient to work from that for their English
retains a native character, and is "as much a commentary on where they are as
mine is on where I am ... leave myself free to structure the final poem by using
their English as a base ..." (ibid: 296). Translation for Rothenberg is basically
collaboration.

This collaboration, according to Rothenberg, can take a number of forms,
depending on specificities of the occasion. He falls back on his experience with
the Senecas and the Navajos to illustrate his point. At times he is a catalyst in
encouraging a situation in which one can begin "... to structure his utterances
with a care for phrasing & spacing that drives them towards poetry". He cites the
example of a Seneca informant Dick Johnny John, who wrote down the translated
prose version of a thanking prayer he himself had sung, and "... the method of
punctuation he was using seemed special ..." and he took a lot of time with his
wording in "... his desire to word it just the way it says there." Rothenberg let
the periods in his informants prose version "mark the end of each lines, made
some vocabulary choices ... tried for the rest to keep clear of what was after all
his poem" (ibid: 296). At times, even when he takes a more active role, he would
often defer to others the choice of words.

When sound events like meaningless vocables act as standard markers to indicate
openings or transitions, Rothenberg choose to translate for meaning. In doing a set
of Seneca Woman's dance songs he decided to

\[ ... \text{translate for meaning, since the meaningless vocables ... were only}
\text{the standard markers that turn up in all the woman's songs: } \text{hey heyah yo}
\text{to mark the opening, gahnoweyah heyah to mark the internal transitions.} \]
use a simple "hey", "oh", or "yeah" as a rough equivalent, but let the movement of the English determine its position (ibid: 297-298).

Given below are the three translated versions of one of the dance songs used by Rothenberg to illustrate his point:

**Version I: paraphrase**

Very nice, nice, when our mothers do the ladies' dance. Graceful, nice, very nice, when our mothers do the ladies' dance . . .

**Version II: word by word rendition that includes the “meaningless refrain”**

hey heya yo oh ho
nice nice nice-it-is
when-they-dance-the-ladies-dance
our-mothers
gahnoweyah heyah
graceful it-is
nice nice nice-it-is
when-they-dance-the-ladies-dance
our-mothers
gahnoweyah heyah (&repeat).

**Version III: Rothenberg’s final translated version**

hey it’s nice it’s nice it’s nice
to see them yeah to see
our mothers do the ladies’ dance
oh it’s graceful & it’s
nice it’s nice it’s very nice
to see them hey to see
our mothers do the ladies’ dance (ibid: 297-298).
On the other hand, while translating Navajo horse-songs, Rothenberg chose to work with the sound as sound. There are basic differences between Navajo and Seneca song structures. Navajo songs are “much fuller, much denser, twists words into new shapes or fills up the spaces between words by insertion of a wide range of “meaningless” vocables, making it misleading to translate primarily for meaning or, finally, to think of total translation in any terms but those of sound” (ibid: 301). Rothenberg was attracted by the possibility of working a way out for all the sounds of the Navajo horse songs into English; for the song that issued from the poetry seemed to him “an extension of it or rose inevitably from the juncture of words and other vocal sound” (ibid: 301). Translating vocables, which has a sense of continuity from the verbal material in the Navajo original, through ‘rhyming or assonantal relationship between the “meaningless” &meaningful segments’, was the immediate challenge faced by Rothenberg. In the example below he illustrates this point:

‘Esdza shiye’
e hye-la
‘esdza shiye’
The woman, my son (vocables) The woman, my son
hye-la nana yeye’e

Putting English words against the Navajo vocables “denies the musical coherence of the original & destroys the actual flow” since “the English words for this and many other situations in the poem are, by contrast to the Navaho, more rounded and further back in the mouth” (ibid.: 302). So he decided to translate the native vocables. The method he chose was to get as far away from writing as possible,
and instead he started speaking and then singing his own words over the original tape with the meaningless vocables, and slowly replacing them with sound he found relevant to his own version. What Rothenberg was aiming was the establishment of a series of sounds that were assonant with the range of his own vocabulary in translation, and to which he could refer whenever the Navaho sounds for which they were substitutes turned up. It is interesting to note the parameters of Rothenberg's method. He found that the basic soundings were different for each song, and he had to establish his sound equivalencies before the act of true translations could begin. For this, he

... made use of the traditional way the Navaho songs begin: with a short string of vocables that will be picked up (in whole or part) as the recurring burden of the song. I found I could set most of my basic vocables or vocable-substitutes into the opening, using it as a key to which I could refer when necessary to determine sound substitutions, not only for the vocables but for word distortions in the meaningful segments of the poems. There was a cumulative effect here too. The English vocabulary of the tenth song - strong on back vowels, semivowels, glides & nasals - influenced the choice of vocables: the vocables influenced further vocabulary choices & vocables in the other songs. . . . Finally, the choice of sounds influenced the style of my singing by setting up a great deal of resonance I found I could control to serve as a kind of drone behind my voice. In ways like this the translation was assuming a life of its own (ibid: 304).

Rothenberg selects the features of nasality and repetition for emphasis in his version:

Because I was thnboyngnng raised ing the dawn NwnnN go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn.
With word distortions, Rothenberg tries to approximate the degree of distortion between the words as sung and words as spoken of the original and aiming at roughly the amount of variation he could discern between the two.

Rothenberg’s final step was to try to account for the audience participation in a song event, for “the typical Navaho performance pattern . . . calls for each person present to follow the singer to whatever degree he can . . . result is highly individualized singing . . . Those who cant follow the words at all may make up their own vocal sounds – anything, in effect, for the sake of participation” (ibid: 304). He infact saw this “indeterminacy to be the key to the further extension of the poems into the area of total translation & and total performance” (ibid: 304-305). He tried out a four track recording system, where track one would record the lead voice; track two, “a voice responsive to the first but showing less word distortion & occasional free departures from the text”; track three, “a voice limited to pure-sound improvisations on the meaningless elements in the text” and track four would record “a voice similar to that on the second track but distorted by means of a violin amplifier placed against the throat & set at ‘echo’ or ‘tremolo’, to be used only as barely audible background filter for the others” (ibid: 306). After recording the four tracks, he had them “balanced & mixed on a monaural tape, . . . present the poems as I’d conceived them & as poetry in fact had always existed . . . to be heard without reference to their incidental appearance on the page (ibid: 306).
Problem of the context

Rothenberg’s proposal evoked strong responses from critics. Attitude ranged from outright dismissal to enthusiastic approval. The charge often levelled against Rothenberg and translators like William Brandon is that they “decontextualize so much that, very often, one can no longer recognize from wherefrom what people’s singular genius - a given piece came after they have worked it over” (Lincoln1983: 14). For instance Brandon keeps in mind that in translating “... all that we want from any of it is the feeling of its poetry” (Brandon1971: xiv).

One of the strongest attack came from William Bevis, who expressed reservations at this quest for the feeling of poetry by drastically altering original field documentation and transcriptions, “the destruction of the spirit of the original” (Bevis1975: 316). “The urge to make things more explicit for whites may fill a ritual with alien material or may simply ruin the charming understatement of a song” (ibid: 319). He relegated both Rothenberg and Brandon to the “Not recommended” section of the bibliography of his essay “American Indian Verse Translation” finding their methodology unconvincing and misleading (ibid: 308-323). He found their:

... translations ... not only drastically change the length, images, and form of the originals, but translate with impunity from one genre... and even from one medium (action and painting to words) to another. These freedoms must be added to the distortions inherent in the anthology form: excerpts from sung rituals for instance, appear as autonomous “poems”, although American Indians did not have a written language (ibid: 310).
The measuring criterion for Bevis is how well do they allow us to enter the imaginative world of Indian art? And in this Rothenberg fails, for according to Bevis, neither the "'events' nor the copious notes tells us much about Indian poetry... In blind attention to content, and total insensitivity to style and aesthetic form, such 'renderings'... rivals the worst anthropology... often show little respect for Indian artistic devices such as style, form, genre, and medium..." (ibid: 319). For Bevis there is no easy entry into a strange world, no shortcuts to aesthetic experiences. Therefore extensive changes of the original in order to 'totally translate' the 'feeling' or 'hidden meanings' should be practised as little as possible. Instead he prefers elaborate and detailed notes to complement literal translation.

Literal translation for William Bevis is a fidelity to the text, the lines of a song, and not incorporating commentaries, or a "poetic idea" imbedded in a culture into the translation of a song. Bevis finds it objectionable that Brandon takes "his strongest lines from the informant's explanation to whites..." (ibid: 316) in the translation of a Pawnee song. "Paradoxically, Brandon destroys the feeling of this poem precisely because he makes the work itself convey the ethnological information that belongs in accompanying notes" (ibid: 317). For Bevis a reflection of the original style, form and dramatic situation is essential to get to the real essence of the original songs. Many translators, by cutting repetitions and adding images to make a work self-explanatory, aim at an autonomous poem thus uprooting it from it's larger contextual moorings. Transliterated ethnography in
itself is not necessarily poetry, no more than folkloric motifs or anthropological paradigms and may betray the original by failing to carry over its music, tribal value, or clarity and depth of perception (Lincoln 1984:12). None has shown the betrayal of an original better than Tedlock in his illustration of Frank Hamilton Cushing’s translation of Zuni tales. Cushing not only embroiders his translation with “devices, lines, and even whole passages which are clearly of his own invention”, but also invented similes that “may have literary merit in English, but they do not have literary existence in Zuni” (Tedlock1983: 59). The Zuni characters in Cushing’s translation uses oaths like “by the delight of death”, “soul of my ancestors”, “demons and corpses” etc. The Zunis not only do not have such oaths, but “they never make profane use of words denoting death, soul, ancestors, corpses . . .” (ibid: 59).

Mediating total translation and literal translation

Though Bevis placed Rothenberg’s Shaking The Pumpkin in his “not recommended” section, a Native American publication Akwesasne Notes printed a very favourable review and cites it amongst it’s recommended books (Chapman 1975: 292). H.S. McAllister, in an essay in 1976, defends Rothenberg’s intent and declares that “these new translations like the originals, are vital poetry, and the essential alienness of the originals has been translated as well as the words” (Lincoln1983: 10). Huntsman finds Rothenberg’s works to be “reasonably reliable translations and effective English poetry . . . some idea of what it means to be part of a small, coherent, esoteric group, participating in a meaningful community
event... poems are engrossing and there is much to be gained from the excitement they generate when they are performed” (Huntsman1983: 92-93). Kenneth Lincoln, outlines the aim of translation in a manner that can accommodate Rothenberg:

When more than one language and culture and space/time lie at either end of the multiple and metaphoric process, the translator must look two ways, at least, at once: to carry over, as much as possible, the experiential integrity of the original and to regenerate the spirit of the source in a new verbal performance. Two languages and artists live at the beginning and the end, neither simultaneous nor identical, but reciprocal –and recipient to differing audiences (Lincoln1983: 10).

Translation is a difficult project and good translation of any literature requires a native or near-native sensitivity to both languages, and few translators have that competence:

The inherent differences between languages, combined with symbolism, figurative or metaphoric manipulation of ordinary language, secret and esoteric language, and fossils of earlier, now archaic language, all contribute to a maddening arabesque of many varieties of meaning that only the most perceptive and careful translator should confront (ibid: 10).

Thus the need is to take into account the merit of Rothenberg’s method and the valid points in Bevis’ objections. One has to mediate both in order to arrive at an effective method of translating oral literary forms. Rothenberg’s method of collaborative translation, truly reciprocal and inter-tribal can be a good basis for a working model where an artist’s creativity will be participatory. Barre Toelken
and Tacheeni Scott⁴, in their essay, “Poetic Retranslation and the Pretty Languages of Yellowman”, attempts a collaborative and provocative poetic retranslation of Toelken’s own prose translation of a Navajo Coyote narrative. Such retranslation are not “simply a matter of arranging ‘regular’ oral prose into poetic-looking lines; rather, the translator is forced to deal with the full content in each line . . . forced to deal with dramatic directness without a comfortable recourse to indirect description” (Toelken and Scott1981: 66). On retranslation, Toelken “discovered patterns, words, and meanings that [I] did not see before; . . . forced to deal directly with matters [I] easily buried in prose explanation; worst of all . . . failed to hear some words . . . didn’t think they were there. Scott’s elucidation of cultural and linguistic features of the story . . . provided the means of making legitimate and accurate analytic comments which otherwise would have remained unformed” (ibid: 70). Informant’s commentary is of great value in assessing specimens of oral literatures, and examples, which apparently seems to fit in unobtrusively to mainstream categories of appreciation, without being subjected to the informants own critical and cultural observations are often inaccurate and error prone. One has to be careful not to predicate ones own cultural and aesthetic prejudices. Brian Swann points out that Native American literatures and western literature are hardly compatible. “Basic assumptions about the universe are not the same . . .” (Swann1993: 03). Native American oral literature is not as neatly divided into prose and poetry as in western critical

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⁴ Toelken’s co-author and co-translator was a Navajo, Orville Tacheeni Scott, a then Ph.D. candidate in Biology at the University of Oregon
discourses. Huntsman in his essay "The Translation Dilemma" shows how Howard Norman in the series called "Wishing Bone Cycle" profitably adapted the poetic form to renditions that seemed to be in prose since they are not sung or chanted (Huntsman 1983: 94).

Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock articulates the belief that "all oral narratives . . . are . . . inherently poetic in the sense of being organized in lines":

The outward appearance of a printed collection of oral narratives immediately gives away a basic feature of our attitude toward such narratives: we regard them as a sort of primitive or non-literate counterpart to our own written prose fiction and thus set them forth in gray masses of words broken only by paragraphing . . . My own consideration of the paralinguistic features of Zuni narratives, including voice quality, loudness, and pausing, has led me to treat these narratives not only as drama but as poetry, with each pause indicated by a line change as in written poetry . . . (Tedlock 1981:337).

Dennis Tedlock in his essay "On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative" points out that cross-translation shifting of Genres often has its own advantages. The treatment of oral narrative as dramatic poetry has a number of analytical advantages:

Some of the features of oral narrative which has been branded "primitive", on the basis of comparisons with written prose fiction, can now be understood as "poetic" instead. It has been said, for example, that while most of our prose narrative is highly is highly "realistic", primitive narrative is full of fantasy: a stone moves like an animal, an animal speaks like a man, a man jumps through a hoop and becomes a coyote. Yet when we encounter gross and unexplained distortions of reality in Yeats, for example, we are apt to call them not "primitive" but "dream-
He illustrates his points with examples of Zuni narrative. In Zuni oral narratives, emotions are evoked rather than described, an expectation generally involved with poetry, and such evocations are myriad and sometimes quite subtle. The following excerpts is a part of a Zuni narrative that refers to the unhappy state of a person:

He went out, having been given the quiver, and wandered around.
He was not thinking of killing a deer, he just wandered around.
In the evening he came home empty handed (ibid: 71).

According to Tedlock's information, these lines clearly indicates to a Zuni that the person described is depressed, and his subsequent death three days later is regarded as some sort of a suicide, though it was described in the story as an accident.

Tedlock also treats repetitions of whole passages in Zuni narratives in a manner that is akin to repetitions in epic poetry and also to refrains in songs and in written poetry. He points out that, “refrains are often varied from one rendition to the next, and the same is true . . . for the repeated passages in Yugoslav epic as shown by Lord, and in Zuni narrative” (ibid: 72). Such variations in refrains are evident in the following Zuni illustration. The first passage is a foster mother’s quotation to a boy on what he must say when he meets his biological mother, followed by the second passage which is what the boy says actually when he meets his biological mother:

1. My Sun father
   made you pregnant.
When you were about to deliver
it was to Nearing Waters
that you went down to wash. You washed at the bank.

II. My Sun father
Made you pregnant.
When he made you pregnant you
sat in there and your belly began to grow large.
Your belly grew large
you
you were about to deliver, you had pains in your belly, you were about to give birth to me, you had pains in your belly
you gathered your clothes
and you went down to the bank to wash (ibid: 72).

Hymes, while unfettered in his appreciation of Tedlock's success with the Zunis and the Quiche' Maya, however warns against "unfortunate implications that might mislead and limit what can be done in the field as a whole . . . This method, that of identifying pauses in spoken performance, is unavailable for narratives in Shoalwater, Kathalmet, and Clackamas Chinook, . . . and for narratives in Wasco (Wishram) told by Louis Simpson" (Hymes1981: 337). Hymes finds it untenable and difficult to accept Tedlock's assertion that it is not possible to study the paralinguistic features in the absence of tape-recorded performances, and that "our most valuable resource, far more valuable than the phonetically transcribed text so cherished in the past, will be our tape recordings of actual performance" (ibid: 338). According to Hymes, "total loss" of paralinguistic features always does not take place He gives the instance of Louis Simpson's transcription of
“The Deserted Boy” where Edward Sapir pointed out departure from normal pitch for expressive particles and regular indication of extra length for emphasis. Simpson’s notebook reveals that Sapir used abbreviatory formulas for recurrent words and phrases and indications are that he did not interrupt the dictation for translation. Similarly Melville Jacobs recordings of Clackmas texts indicate “that he recorded straight through a text, seeking translation later” (ibid: 338), and included such observation that lengthening of vowels or consonants were invariably rhetorical.

Unlike Tedlock, Hymes ascribes great value to texts dictated without the benefit of the tape recorder also, because, “though deficient for some purposes, they are often the only monument of their kind of heritage”:

That the texts exist at all in usable form may make them the only avenue to a tradition for descendents of those who dictated them. When one assesses the value of Native American materials, one must consider the situation of Native Americans themselves (ibid: 339).

Reworkings

Thus reworking from earlier documented and transcribed text to translate oral verse forms can be a valid exercise. These reworkings or retranslation can assume different significance to different translators depending on their cultural background and intention. In the following illustrations the methodology of Brian Swann, who is a non-native white critic and Thomas E. Sanders (Nippawanock) and Walter W. Peek (Metacomet), two Native American critics are expounded.
Swann in his anthology *Songs of the Sky* (1985) reworks earlier versions of Native American oral songs, to rid them of their collector's bias. Denying the epithet 'translation' to his work, he calls them *Versions of Native American Songs-Poems* as his subtitle, because they are based on field-work by some people "whose various assumptions about the Indian could not but color their recordings":

For instance, Frances Densmore was a "friend" to the Indian in the traditional way. She believed he was a "savage" on the way to "development." She had definite notions about musical correctness, also. The Indian, she said, "has no ideas of true pitch." In other words her ears were recording through a western filter (Swann1985: 05).

Even Franz Boas, who "knew the language, folklore, and traditional cultures of 'Kwakiutl,' or Kwagul, perhaps better than any other white man before or since suffered from a . . . conceptual tone-deafness, an insensitivity to the categories and interconnections of Kwagul culture" (ibid: 18).

Swann utilises what he calls the 'silence of space', and allow the shape of that space to enact a meaning, where the text behaves like a living object and no mere artifice. Alive to the limitations of transforming original native oral texts into simple American lyrics, he declares that he is offering 'shadows of shadows', hoping that "a common humanity should transcend most differences". Swann tries to redo verbose versions of native songs, and to "get back some of the terseness of the 'original' . . . stripped down versions." He cuts down on words and reduce repetitions, specially the meaningless syllables he did not understand, and felt that there was no way in which he could use them. One can illustrate Swann's method
by contrasting his version of a Huma song with that of Natalie Curtis’s translation named ‘Song of the Mocking-Bird’:

**Version I: Arwap (original Huma)**

'\textit{Mai arwa} --
\textit{'riwa} --
'\textit{Mai ariwa} --
\textit{'riwa} --
\textit{Shakwa tza mi na hi}
\textit{Shakwa tza mi na}
\textit{Hunya kwa pai va}
\textit{Hunya kwa hui pa} (ibid: 6-7).

**Version II: Song of the Mocking-Bird (Curtis’s translation)**

Thin little clouds are spread
Across the blue of the sky,
Thin little clouds are spread --
Oh, happy am I as I sing,
I sing of the clouds in the sky.

Thus tells the bird,
‘Tis the mocking-bird who sings,
And I stop to hear,
For he is glad at heart
And I will list to his message.

Then up the hill,
Up the hill I go my straight road,
The road of good --
Up the hill I go my straight road,
The happy road and good (ibid: 07).
Swann’s version is based on the word-by-word translation and explanation of the song provided in the end of Curtis’s book, which was the basis of Curtis’ own translation. The difference is obvious.

Sanders and Peek, points out that “…more recent poets who have become interested in the literature manage to include- the flavor of the language coupled with an aesthetic rather than a scientific response to people. In the earlier translations, the dominant Judeo-Christian beliefs of the translators were either deliberately intruded or subtly included despite the unquestioned good intentions of the translators” (Sanders and Peek 1974: 104). They trace out, with the help of an Anishinabe song, “Chant to the Fire-fly”, first translated by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, how the approach to translation has undergone a change and shows
how the earlier versions were coloured by the translators’ own cultural and literary background:

**Version I: Anishinabe Original**

*Wau wau tay see!*
*Wau wau tay see!*
*E mow e shin*
*Tahe bwau ne baun-e wee!*
*Be eghaun- be eghaun – ewee!*
*Wau wau tay see!*
*Wau wau tay see!*
*Was sa koon ain je gun.*
*Was sa koon ain je gun.*

**Version II: Literal Translation**

Flitting-white-fire-insect! waving-white-fire-bug! give me light before I go to bed! give me light before I go to sleep. Come, little dancing white-fire-bug! Come, little flitting white-fire-beast! Light me with your bright white-flame-instrument- your little candle.

**Version III: Literary Translation**

Fire-fly, fire-fly! Bright little thing,
Light me to bed, and my song I will sing.
Give me your light, as you fly o’er my head,
That I may merrily go to my bed.
Give me your light o’er the grass as you creep,
That I may joyfully go to my sleep.
Come, little fire-fly, come, little beast-
Come! And I’ll make you tomorrow a feast.
Come, little candle that flies as I sing,
Bright little fairy-bug – night’s little king;
Come, and I'll dance as you guide me along,
Come, and I'll pay you, my bug, with a song.

**Version IV: More Literal Literary Translation**

**Fire-fly Song**

Flitting white-fire insects!
Wandering small-fire beasts!
Wave little stars about my bed!
Weave little stars into my sleep!
Come, little dancing white fire-bug,
Come, little flitting white-fire beast!
Light me with your white-flame magic,
Your little star-torch.

According to Sanders and Peek, words like 'insect' and 'bug' are contrary to the spirit of the poem, "for the connotative sense of the words reduces the "insect" in ways *Wau wan tay see* does not. There is a sense of denigration involved in such words in the western lexicon, which is far removed "from the intellectual-emotional response" of the Anishinabes to the firefly. The first literary translation is full of inaccuracies:

The equal importance of Man, Coyote, Loon, Bear, and so on in the religious accounts readily testifies to the semantic inaccuracy of white-fire-beast, a concept that the Ojibwa could not have held. Bed and candle are European concepts that cannot be equated with pallet or couch or torch, terms closer to the idea of Ojibwa words. The literary translation further compounds the semantic difficulties as European poetic conventions are overlaid . . . . The first literary translation of “Chant to the Fire-fly” suffers from such English conventions as pseudo-heroic couplets and ideas intruded in words used to flesh out the basic iambic
pentameter lines. Exactly how the Ojibwa singer would make a feast for the fire-fly defies thought. The Native American’s trip to the sleep area may have been weary, glad, grateful, or merely resigned, but he would no more turn sleepward “merrily” or “joyfully” than would his white counterpart . . . And nothing (in English or Ojibwa versification) could justify the artificial inversions that create the rhyme (ibid: 106).

The version IV, though devoid of the “most objectionable features” of the third is subsequently revised by Sanders and Peek to the version given below:

**Version V: Fire-fly Song**

Flitting, darting white fire!
Air-borne, roving white fire!
Shine your light about my lodging,
Light the way to where I sleep!

Tireless, darting white-fire!
Restless, roving white-fire!
Guide me with your gleaming.
Guide me with your torch.

Sanders and Peek finds a hypnotic like formula at work in such poems:

Designed to soothe the senses, lull the hearer to sleep, the poem assumes the proportion of incantation, psychologically sound and efficient. The repetitions are pleasingly monotonous, the incremental idea suggestive. Couple the words with the music that accompanies them and caressing, enveloping euphoria results; the lullaby works its magic (ibid: 107).

In any cross cultural studies, the study of Native American oral-derived literature clearly being one, questions of form and function, the use of language, design of literature clearly comes into play, for “the tribal ear listens ceremonially at one
Native American literature, in brief, is a literature in translation" (Lincoln 1983: 10). Translation is an inherent process of evolving an ethnocriticism. It communicates essential truths about art and functions of art forms of the ethnics. It also involves re-examining the methods and functions of translation.

Krupat points out that in a more recent essay written in 1991 'We Explain Nothing, We Believe Nothing: American Indian Poetry & Problematics of Translation', Rothenberg shows his awareness that translation is "inevitably criticism":

Translation . . . involves . . . a discourse on its own problematics. . . . It functions as a commentary on the other and itself and on the differences between them. It is much more a kind of question than a summing up (Krupat 1992:198).

For Rothenberg translation as a process can be a principal mean by which questions that deal with orality, the sacred, and the question of "imperial displacement" can be explored. Translation, for him is as "much to cultivate the mystery [of otherness, difference, alterity] as to dispel it", in a manner akin to the Brecht's Verfremdung, to take the mystery into his own language, and as Asad had said, "learning to live another form of life" (ibid: 198). According to Krupat, Rothenberg's method can be a part of the "project of anti-imperial translation", because his practice "seeks inevitably to challenge 'the dominant assumptions' in the west 'about the form and function of the poetic act' . . . to cause the translator to critically examine "the normal state of his or her own language":
Thus translation can become “a calling into question of dominant attitude in the colonizing culture” and perhaps “help foster [in the dominant culture] the conditions for a new, even a newly sacred sense of poetry and of life”—a sense that might learn a good deal from traditional Indian peoples (ibid: 199).

As Barry O’Connell points out, “the terrain on which Native Americans and Euro-Americans walk is mapped by inequality. The realities of exploitation and power leave no place untouched (Swann1993: 17). The European languages have internalised these inequalities, and very powerful conceptions of the Natives thus formed, circulate, often unconsciously, in the cultural mainstream of the United States of America.

Towards an Oral-derived Poetics: the Native American Example

Thus any approach to a Native American oral derived poetics must be initiated by trying to understand how it is different from the mainstream western critical episteme in the periphery of which it circulates. The first question to ask is ‘how is Native American Literature different?’ Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American of mixed Laguna-Sioux blood, answers this in her essay ‘The Sacred Hoop’:

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 the individual’s ability to feel emotion . . . The tribes seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and to share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language,
those truth of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity" (Allen1975: 112-113).

The generation of a Native American appreciative paradigm is the result of the quest by leading American folklorists to ground native poetic practices in more plausible conceptual categories borne out by practices themselves.

Fidelity of language: the power of the word

Language is essentially the bearer of the "truth of being and experience ..." where the "artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of the language itself, for in language we seek to share our being with that of the community, and thus to share in the communal awareness of the tribe" (ibid: 113). It's the language that gives the tribes their identity; people are born into and die out of a language, which gives them their essential being:

Words donot come after or apart from what naturally is, but are themselves natural genes, tribal history in the bodies of the people. People are born into their heritage and tribal tongue. For the most part, they do not create words anymore than they give birth to themselves or make up nature. Names can come from dreams, personal ties, external events, medicine people or ancestors. Singers sing song drawing tonally on the voice as an interpretive human instrument for words living in the mouth and body; pitch modulates meaning; accents give cadence to meaning drawing together. Instead of rhyming words ... the songs rhyme perceptions, moods, natural objects, the world as word...(Lincoln1983: 47).

Poetic rendition in an oral context is a complex activity - a multimedia event that includes simultaneous singing, dancing, drumming and conducting. In such a context the words assume great importance. "Forgetting the words, in a culture
without paper would be like losing the song . . . the word was the only one among the other cultural variables (costumes, dancing, drumming, refrains) that was not a shared and indestructible certainty. It was almost as if the words had a life of their own, the power of whose presence, or the gap left by whose absence, confirmed or threatened the very being of the singer" (Lowenstein1985: 187). Inuit verses used words in a way that was almost analogous to other tools of the material environment. "Words have a concrete property which can be woven, wrapped up, carved and put together, for either functional or aesthetic purposes" (ibid: 190).

The following Inuit verses will highlight this point:

1. I put some words together, I made a little song, I took it home one evening, Mysteriously wrapped, disguised . . .

2. I weave together Bits of song to answer you . . .

3. Let me cleave words, sharp little words. like the fire-wood that I split with my axe (ibid: 190).

The Inuits had an acute perception of the power and malleability of words. The essence of the relationship between life and spoken word is suggested by the word anerca that signifies both breath and poetry. Orpingalik, an Inuit seer outlining the imperative behind the name (of his) 'Death-bed song' says that, "this is what I
call my song because it is as important to me to sing it as it is to draw breath.”

This elusive but life sustaining quality is an integral part of the singers' private experience; but at that moment when the singer “adds to it the drumming and the dance, and brings the yet uninitiated chorus-audience into participation that the compositional process blends with the general culture. The new becomes the familiar – though, as a rule, the song remains the poet’s property, and no one is entitled to sing it” (ibid: 187). However, “authorship of a poem is not possible. Though a man may own his poem or song, he does not create it himself. It becomes his through *Wah’kon-tah*[^5^], a lesser divinity, or an elder – alive or dead.

We can then, only attribute the poem to the poets culture: Ojibwa (Chippewa), Cherokee, Navaho, etc” (Sanders and Peek 1974: 117)

Thus the basic premises from which the aesthetic in Native American oral derived ethnic literature can be approached is the apparently simple assumption that truth of nature should be expressed by the truth in the spoken words. The Native American bestows great power in the word. The spoken word is deemed to be independent of its speaker, with the story or the event assuming a life of its own.

The Tribal poets are basically keepers of the sacred word bundle, in Momaday’s words, “men made of words” (Lincoln 1983: 44), who regard rhythm, vision, craft, nature and words as gifts that precedes and continue beyond temporal dimensions.

Washington Matthews records the following song of a Navajo priest that was

[^5^]The Dakota’s believe that there are two kinds of songs: songs made by the people, and songs that come in visions through the spirit of *Wah’kon-tah*. *Wah’kon-tah* is the great mystery, the sum total of all things, the conception of an impersonal, spiritual and life giving power. It is from the voices of *Wah’kon-tah* that people gain spiritual power and wisdom. A pan-Native American concept, other equivalents are *Wakonda, Wakan-tanka, Nesaru, Manido, Orenda* etc.
sung before he was about to relate the story of creation to Matthews (Astrov1962: 03). The song is a solemn affirmation of telling the truth as understood by the priest:

I am ashamed before the earth;
I am ashamed before the heavens;
I am ashamed before the dawn;
I am ashamed before the evening twilight;
I am ashamed before the blue sky;
I am ashamed before the sun.
I am ashamed before that standing within me
Which speaks with me.
Some of these things are always looking at me.
I am never out of sight.
Therefore I must tell the truth.
I hold my word tight to my breast.

"This declaration is nothing but a succinct statement of the Indian’s relation to the 'word' as the directing agency that stands powerfully behind every ‘doing,’ as the reality above all tangible reality. It is the thought and the word that stand face to face with the conscience of the native not the deed" (ibid: 03). Thus, telling of the truth is of primary importance:

A truly sacramental sense of language means that objects and words are so fused that their creation, the event, is itself creative, bringing into this time and space the enduring powers which truly effect that which the event claims, and such action cannot be undone. Its only aim and intention is truth, not manipulation. Correct form, in such a context, is the fundamental moral dimension of the human engagement with words. Lies destroy correct form. They destroy the real relationship between man and the natural order (Swann 1984: xii).
According to the Navajo emergence myths, "...in the beginning were the word and the thing, the symbol and the object...and ... symbol is word, and words is the mean by which substance is organized and transformed" (Ruoff 1990: 06). Navajo world was brought into being by gods who entered the sweathouse and thought the world into existence:

The earth will be, from ancient times with me there is knowledge of it
The mountains will be from ancient times with me there is knowledge of it.
...

The earth will be, from the very beginning I have thought it.
The mountains will be, from the very Beginning I have thought it.
...

The earth will be from ancient times
I speak it.
The mountains will be, from ancient times
I speak it.
...

Dennis Tedlock talks of a Zuni oral text, Chimiky'ana'kowa, that literally means "that which was the beginning", and "these words were made by what happened at the beginning, and to tell these words is to happen the beginning again" (Kroeber 1981: 45). To make the beginning happen again is an important illustration of the importance accorded to the power of the word in both Navajo
and Zuni rituals, where the recounting serves as a kind of therapy, conducted by a shaman, "for the benefit of a principal communicant, customarily styled in anthropological writings as the 'patient.' But with the joining in of assistant singers, impersonators, new initiates, and assorted spectators, it becomes an occasion for general religious revival" (Bierhorst 1974: 281). The word here is not a mere linguistic sign, "purely instrumental, a mere means of communication. It is announced, a breathing out of the life that is within, capable of providing a construction of reality that is unique to the speaker. For all of these reasons, the act of speaking, and not just the subject of the speaking, was considered to be charged with power, creative and not merely descriptive, sacred" (Wiget 1985: 22).

Silence: the sanctuary of sound

This generative power of the words resides in the hold of silence. According to Momaday silence is the "dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places ... silence is the sanctuary of sounds. Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence: there they are sacred" (Ruoff 1990:08). Silence is also the channel through which the power of thought is communicated through visionary experiences and visions and dreams are moments of communicating without words. Thus the Anishinabe draws the strength of their *Mide-wiwin* songs from the Great Spirit *Manido* by inducing visitation through vision questing (see page 66, chapter-II for a discussion on the songs of *Mide-wiwin*). "Solitude and physical ordeals induced visions and brought the shaman to an experience of near-death and resuscitation, which transformed him" (Wiget 1985: 31). According to
an Inuit shaman Igjugarjuk, to be a shaman is to “choose suffering”, for only “solitude and suffering open the human mind” (ibid: 31). The shaman learns the songs and the sacred words in the initiatory trance cast by the visitation of the shaman’s guardian spirit. Silence is a very large part of any Native American poem; it is the “Great Mystery” that surrounds and embraces . . . and the worship of this Great Mystery was silent, solitary, and free from all self-seeking. The Great Mystery or *Wah’kon-tah* is the sum total of all things, “the collective totality that always was – without beginning, without end”:

Neither a force nor a spirit, it is the inexplicable sharing-togetherness that makes all things, animate and inanimate, of equal value, equal importance, and equal consequence because they are all Wah’kon-tah simultaneously, their forms collectively creating the form of Wah’kon-tah which is, obviously, incapable of being anthropomorphized (Sanders and Peek ed.1974: 16).

At the heart of the concept of the “Great Mystery” is a “complete abstracting process”, the belief that “all things exist in *Wah’kon-tah* and *Wah’kon-tah* exists in all things.” Such a concept is radically different from the Judeo-Christian concept of a “Supreme Being” . . . based on the principle of a “anthropomorphic, Jehovah-like deity or, at least, a Zeus like God.” According to Natalie Curtis, in the Native American scheme of things “Everything that has life has spirit as well as fleshy form. All things have *nagi* – soul. Rocks and animals have the power to appear in the form of man and to speak to man in dream or in vision (ibid: 16-17). Songs that come in dreams or in visions through the spirit of the Great Mystery “have powers to work wonders.” The visionary experience reveals the unfamiliar
side of nature to the initiated few, and they make it a communal affair by performances, which are basically, shared affairs, aiming at good for the maximum. The holy man’s intention was clearly to extend himself for his people. The Native American “… aesthetics turn on a sense of tribe, that is, an extended family that reciprocates among people, places, history, flora and fauna, spirits and gods” (Lincoln 1983: 42). Lincoln points out that tribes like the Lakotas had no word for poet or poem. Native American’s “did not talk of a secular aesthetics apart from religion” and “art for them could no more exist for its own sake than a person separated from a tribe” (ibid: 82):

A plains holy man – healer, visionary, teacher, artist – is inspired by a sacred, natural world through dreams. He converses with the energies of plants and animals and the earth itself, and the core of his identity is shaped by vision questing. The holy man appears variously as shaman or priest, healer or witch doctor, but this tribal role is to bind the people’s spiritual needs with the things of the world . . . The medicine man releases the spirits in things to move through this world; in his integrated reality there is no split between ideas and things. Religion and culture fuse with medicine and morality, art and history (ibid: 84).

Dream songs are pan-Native American. “The power of dreams to reshape identity about an interior vision revealed by the unconscious became the central religious experience . . . dreams were badges of identity. Even where dreams did not serve this function, they were considered the source of wisdom and creativity” (Wige 1985: 38). Dream songs are clearly identified with the dreamer, a source from which one can draw strength and renew the spirit. Dreams also communicate a sense of implicit rightness to the dreamer. Frances Densmore records an
Anishinabe medicine man confidently declaring "The heavens go with me" drawing from the radical faith of his dream (ibid: 38). The following song recorded by Knud Rasmussen from the Inuits was received by a woman Angekok from her helping spirit in a sudden moment of revelation:

The great sea
Has sent me adrift,
It moves me as the weed in a great river,
Earth and great weather moves me,
Have carried me away,
And move my inward part with joy (Astrov1962: 29).

She repeated the song continuously in what seems to be a ceremony of release:

These ... she was repeating incessantly during a gathering, in the large snowhouse - intoxicated with joy; and all in the house felt the same intoxication of delight. And without being asked they began to state all their misdeeds, as well as those of others, and those whom felt themselves accused and admitted their offenses obtained release from these by lifting their arms and making movements as if to fling away all evil, all that was false and wicked was thrown away... the entrancing repetitions of songs of joy led voluntarily to a catharsis and purification of the soul (ibid: 29-30).

The Sacred Hoop: quest for balance and proportion

A prime concern of Native American oral-derived aesthetics is the articulation of the importance of balance and proportion. "Ceremonial patterns includes the four world directions (east, west, south, north) which are analogous to the four planes of human body (front, back, left, right)" and "creates the repetitions and pairings in both song and story"(Sanders and Peek1974: 116). This is clear in the Navajo
symbol of the *Umane*, and the sacred connotations of the number four (page 37, chapter-11).

The ceremonial pattern emphasizes pairings of words, colors, animals, expressions, stanzas. The sort of pairing obvious in light and dark, yellow and white, sun and rain, land and water rises out of the idea of duality most apparent in Father Sky and Mother Earth. Just as the closed couplet in English versification creates a sense of completion, so does this pairing in Native American poetry – as Spinden says, ‘an effect not of rhyming sounds but of rhyming thoughts’ (ibid: 116).

Movements are expressed in terms of balance and proportion rather than in terms of conflict, and order achieved out of a conflict is glorified rather than the conflict itself. An integral part of the Navajo poetic vision is the quest for an orderly design, the trail of beauty that concludes Navajo ritualistic songs. The study of the theme, style and syntax of the following extract of the Navajo Beadway ceremonial narrative will reveal this underlying quest (Zolbrod1987: 20):

On the east side a white house had long been standing, so the story goes.
On the south side a blue house had long been standing, so the story goes.
On the West Side a yellow house had long been standing, so the story goes.
And on the north side a black house long had stood, so the story goes.

In each direction the houses stood, the storytellers say.
So that the four colors intersected where the four straight rows converged.

To the east where the white house stood the white eagles dwelled, they say.
To the south where the blue house stood dwelled sparrow hawks, they say.

To west where the yellow house stood lived the yellowtailed hawks, they say.
And to the north where the black house stood the black eagles lived, they say (ibid: 20-21).

Zolbrod points out the close link between verbal structures and graphic representations in Navajo expressive behaviours like songs, stories and sand paintings:

The measured verbal patterns here reinforce the symmetrical arrangement of houses, colors, and occupants explicitly oriented to the four directions. Furthermore, the nearly identical first four lines and incrementally repetitive last four duplicates the carefully balanced design found in most sand paintings, while the medial two-line stanza identifies the central point where the four colors converge in the form of a cross. Such a configuration occurs often in Navajo sacred stories, and such patterned syntax occurs often as well” (ibid: 21).

The study of the Navajo original (as recited by Curly To’aheediini to Father Berard Haille in 1931) reveals a deliberate archaic diction and highly formal language that combines to represent the “classical Navajo poetic style”:

The steadily repeated storyteller’s term *dijn*, which here is a contracted form of the old fourth person distributive plural of the verb *jini*, he says, in the continuative tense and imperfective mood, indicates that these lines have been recited continuously by one generation of storytellers after another. The Navajo informant who helped me translate the passage said it was typical of sacred storytelling down to its very rhythm, which had “been very carefully maintained.” That, he added,
Figure v
Navajo sand painting
"is why the old storyteller’s distributive plural *dajni* comes out *dijti.*"

An expert grammarian with a thorough knowledge of ceremonial lore, he called this segment a “sandpainting with words,” and he was eager to have me recognize how the elements in it were grouped in pairs and fours, and how much careful balance it displayed (ibid: 21).

In both Navajo literature and the graphic arts like weavings and sandpaintings (see figure v), the concern for order and proportion is a constant preoccupation. The cross of houses in rows emanating from a central point as exemplified in the above excerpt is a fundamental motif in Navajo artistic expressions. Frequent in chantway narratives like the Beadway, it is also replicated in Navajo sandpaintings and weavings. Contextualized against the sense of orderly design evoked by Navajo poetry, these patterns reveal the graphic dimension of this concern, thus articulating a “relationship between poetry and the other arts that is missing in western tradition, and perhaps yield a better understanding of Native American cultures...” (ibid: 14). The following illustration from the ‘Nightchant’ called “The Whirling Logs” refers to an episode in which the protagonist seals himself in a hollow log and makes his way down the San Juan River into the centralmost world. There two logs spin around the swirling surface of the lake from which the four original rivers flow in four directions. This confluence marks the site where valuable knowledge about curing and planting is gained:

The black cross in the middle symbolizes the spruce logs crisscrossing each other; and from the central lake, symbolized by the blue square in the exact middle, grow four sacred plants whose cultivation will prevent hunger. and whose origins are thus associated with life giving subterranean water. Positioned around the cross are four pairs of gods or
Holy People, each couple consisting of a male and a female dressed in black and white respectively. Two mountain sheep gods carrying black cloud sacks on their backs stand toward the north and south edges of the illustration, and two major deities of the Navajo pantheon, Talking God and Growling God, stand to the east and the west. Guardian symbols such as lightning arrows, sunflowers, and snakes frequently surround the interior design of a sandpainting, as they do here. Notice, too, how a female rainbow guardian borders the illustration on three sides, leaving an eastern opening to allow evil to escape and good to enter... a broken enclosure around the outer edge (ibid: 25-26).

Since the potential for disorder is always present, the Navajos avoids unbroken circles leaving and outlet for evil and an entry point for potential benevolent forces. This radial design is a recurrent motif and “by opposing a perimeter against a central locus, it suggest a tense duality that set inside against outside, containment against release, upward against downward movement... stands abstractly for the familiar theme of order versus disorder”(ibid: 27). While arrangement of details may vary from sandpaintings to sandpaintings, they share certain broad features. “Each conveys a strong image of centrality... the design is composed so that at the same time other details radiate outward until the periphery hangs in uneasy balance against the center”(ibid: 26):

The image of center counterposed against a perimeter applies broadly to Navajo culture and not just poetry and design. It is seen in the continued use of hogans and sweatlodges; in the Navajo conception of geography, where four sacred mountains continue to mark the limits of the Navajo world; in the practiced tradition of carrying pollen when leaving the reservation; and in the desire of even the most modernized Navajos to return home, especially to die (ibid: 30).
The graphic representations of harmony in the radial compositions have their verbal counterpart in Navajo oral lore. In a Navajo creation story first recorded by Washington Matthew's in his Navaho Legends, the goddess Asdzaa nadleehe or Changing Woman lays out the condition for a stable world before Johonaa'ei the Sun by declaring that "there can be no harmony in the universe as long there is no harmony between us" (ibid; 27). However, the threat of disorder is always present. Even after reconciliation. The Sun and Changing Woman continue to quarrel occasionally that is indicated when "the wind blows and the sky is black with overcast clouds." Lightning then fills the heaven and "the whole world suffers" with the lapse in their "conjugal solidarity"(ibid: 28). But the conflict is not the major concern here, but rather the order achieved out of its resolution. The central theme of the story is hozho, "a fairly untranslatable term which can only be approximated in English by combining terms like beauty, balance, and harmony":

As the people grow more complex biologically, psychologically, spiritually and socially, they learn how to mitigate evil with good by developing a relationship with the supernaturals and among themselves. The pivotal element in achieving that intricate set of relationships is the fundamental relationship between male and female . . . everything that happens throughout the story relates directly or indirectly to the notion of delicate balance between male and female (Zolbrod1983: 222).

Evelyn Hatcher, a critic of Navajo art observes that "illustrations in the European tradition would center on the battles of Monster Slayer with much use of conflicting movement in the form of opposed diagonals and active lines full of
wiggly curves as can be seen in the numerous representations of Saint George and the Dragon. But the dry-paintings, both in content and in form, glorify not the conflict but the order achieved as a result of it" (Zolbrod 1987: 18). A verbal counterpart of the point made by Evelyn Hatcher is a passage regarding the Navajo war God Naayeeneizghani. In it he destroys evil monsters after which he is advised by his mother to take off his armor and cease fighting. Ignoring her, he sets out to kill Sa’ah, the one who brings old age; Hak’azasdzaa the Cold Woman, who freezes the earth each year; Te’e’i dine’e the poverty creatures who gradually wear out goods and utensils; and Dichin hastiin the Hunger Man, who depletes food supplies. As he is about to strike each one, he learns respectively that Sa’ah makes room for the unborn, Hak’az asdzaa gives the earth an annual winter’s rest, the Te’e’i dine’e keep people busy fashioning new tools and new clothes, and Dichin hastiin compels them to plant and harvest instead of idly doing nothing. Thus, Monster Slayer comes to realise that a dynamic balance of ebb and flow is necessary in a world where death terminates life and season follows season in an ongoing cyclical rhythm. In the Navajo cosmic view, gods and mortals must stand ready to protect that harmony (ibid: 19).

The imperative behind Native American ritual poetry is to bring the apparently chaotic, disturbed, and accidental under control. At times of radical subjective transition marked by events like puberty, sickness and death, the equilibrium of a normal harmonious state is upset and the “primary purpose of these life-crisis rituals is to control the transition from one state to the next, and so effectively
reintegrate the individual into the social and spiritual orders from which he has been temporarily alienated. This is accomplished by re-establishing his identity and experience as part of the pattern of prototypical events that established for all times the model by which the alienating effects of any life crisis can be nullified"(Wiget1985: 33). The presentation and naming ceremony that follows a birth are rituals that integrate the newborn child as a unique and valuable member of the community “and to establish for him his initial relationships as a human being to the natural and supernatural orders.” In the following Inuit birth song, the shaman tries to compress a life into a day, for the “object of the song was to terminate the transition period as quickly as possible and hasten the child into the fullness of his new life”:

I rise from rest,
Moving swiftly as the raven’s wing
I rise to meet the day –
wa-wa.
My face is turned from the dark of night
My gaze toward the dawn,
Toward the whitening dawn (ibid: 33).

Girls’ puberty rites are held at the time of first menses, and involve confinement for a ritual number of days. Spiritual power was believed to accompany menstruation and hunters and warriors stayed away from them in this condition, “perhaps because the effectiveness of these men as temporary agents of death would be nullified by the power of life represented by the woman’s menses.” Puberty songs are of three types: directional, instructional and the dawn songs.
‘Directional’ songs lay out the requirement of certain acts to be performed. In the Navajo *Kinaalda* combing songs, the young girl is clothed in the beautiful garments of ‘Changing Woman’ and identified with Navajo image of beauty, fertility and womanliness. The ‘instructional’ songs are the vehicles for communicating to the new adult the esoteric knowledge associated with tribal mythology and ritual practice. The ‘Dawn songs’ sung on the last day of the ritual celebrates the girls entry into adult life as she runs toward the eastern horizon, expressing a urgent desire to integrate with the new world of womanhood. The conclusion of such ceremonies at dawn affirms a link between the cosmic cycles and the changes bringing the young girl into womanhood (ibid: 34).

Sickness are disruptions in life resulting from evil power lodged in the body through the incarnation of a foreign object or by the trespassing of sacred space or unsanctioned contact with the sacred. Blowing an aspersion of medicinal plants upon it or sucking it out rids the evil power. In the Navajo Hoop (*Tsepame*) Rite, the patient is passed through four hoops, each of which, according to the sanctioning myth, further removed the skin of Coyote or Big Snake in which the patient was bound. In the case of pollution through contact with sacred power, the patient replicate the journey of the culture hero into the mythic past through the chant narrative, who being the first victim of the affliction, has acquired the power to deal with it. In the Navajo Windway the patient/hero is taken by Talking God through the four lower worlds at the end of which he confronts and defeats the evil and is brought back to the Earth surface world (ibid: 35).
The trauma of death is not only communal, but also a transition that causes individual problems. If the dead was an enemy slain in a battle, pollution contaminated the victor, who had to be purified of the violent disposition. Moreover the taking of a life in an unsanctioned manner violated higher laws and could cause drought and starvation to the community as the belief went that all the dead resided in the clouds and brought rain. If the dead happened to be from the community, the risk was that he may remain in the village and would take someone along for companionship. Songs and prayers for the ritual expulsion of death restored the balance and harmony to both the community and the individual (ibid: 35). From amongst the non-ritualistic verse forms, the Inuit Nith songs are basically tools of social equilibrium (see page 101, chapter II).

One of the most pronounced features of the ritualistic songs is the element of repetition. In the Navajo chants, each song ends with the incremental reiterations of the trail of beauty. Karl Kroeber applies Roman Jakobson’s linguistic criticism to Native American poetry to highlight basic aesthetic principles that go behind repetitions and other elements in the making of Native poetry in an essay called “The Wolf Comes: Indian Poetry and Linguistic Criticism”. He initiates his argument by testing out the validity of the claim of universal applicability of mainstream critical hypotheses on the nature of poetics. The most obvious feature of Native American verse rendition is repetition, “a feature little noticed by our criticism because it is a minor element in our poetry”(Kroeber83a: 98). However, Kroeber points out that “Jakobson’s principles are useful for understanding
Indian poetry/song . . . repetition, a primary characteristics of Indian song, is in fact an important if little noticed feature in the process which Jakobson sees as distinguishing poetic utterance” (ibid: 100-101). In Jakobson’s scheme of things, “focus on the message for its own sake” establishes the poetic function of the language, the poeticite, which is the essential characteristic of all language. Repetition is a primary characteristic that distinguishes Native American poetic utterance, and accounts for powerful effects through the slightest of variations. Kroeber illustrates this point with the help of a song from the *Hako* ceremony of the Pawnee tribe:

*Hoooo!*

*H'Opīrit rīra risha* [repeated four times]

*Hoooo!*

*H'Opīrit ta ahrisha* [repeated four times]

*Hoooo!*

*Reshuru rīra riska* [repeated four times]

*Hoooo!*

*Reshuru ta ahrisha* [repeated four times] (ibid: 101).

The song begins with an invocative *Hoooo* followed by the line that means “Morning Star breathing life approaches from far, vanishing and reappearing.” The meaning of the next line is “Morning Star breathing life approaches nearer but his brilliance fades.” The meanings of the last two lines are identical except that “Morning Star” is substituted by “Dawn”. This song is sung as the celestial morning star fades into the light of the dawn, and dawn into daylight. The repetitions
... microcosmically repeats the function of the song as a whole in the total macrocosm of the ceremony, in which it is repeated four times. Phrases, words, even sounds, furthermore, are systematically repeated in other songs, so that the entire ceremony ... is structured by diversely reiterated superimpositions of selection upon combinations. The range is from phonemic patterns to choreographic movements of large groups of participants (ibid: 101-102).

The ceremony climaxes in a highly condensed lyric that is repeated eight times and reproduces some of the sound of the above song. In this song, a child is blessed some days after ‘Morning Star-Dawn’ song is first sung. The basic meaning is that the principal divinity “breathing life comes from far” and “let this child be fully his”(ibid: 102):

Hoooo!
H'I re ra!
H'I re ra!
Pira uta hao!
Ira uta, uta hao!

The powerful effect of variation in the repetition pattern is borne out by the above extract where slight alteration the repetitive pattern produces interesting poetic effects and is an important part of the overall poetic stratagem.

Metaphor and synecdoche

However, Jakobson’s postulations serve more as a contrast against which the principles underlying Native American poetics can be evoked. His definition of “poetic function” as a “focus on the message for its own sake” precludes any link to referents and “does not believe that a poet is deeply involved with matters of
contact and context . . .’ (ibid: 100). But poets in oral cultures are intrinsically involved with matters of content and context. While denying referentiality to poetry, which is “original” and detached from the ordinary uses of language, Jakobson allows considerable referentiality to prose, “the prosaic variety of verbal art”. Jakobson identifies poetry with metaphor and prose with metonymy. Calling prose a transitional linguistic area, as prosaic art makes “the translation . . . between strictly poetic and strictly referential language”, he declares that the “same linguistic methodology, which poetics use when analyzing the metaphorical style of romantic poetry, is entirely applicable to the metonymical texture of realistic prose” (ibid: 100). Kroeber finds this discussion on prosaic art to be unconvincing and to “the detriment of logical consistency”:

This fuzziness in Jakobson’s discussion on prosaic art is inevitable, because he locates it on an uncalibrated spectrum only limited by polar opposition between “poetic” and “referential” language. This conceptual antithesis is deeply rooted in modern critical thinking. Whether or not they follow I.A. Richards in dividing “emotive” from “scientific” language, modern critics define poeticite in contrast to “ordinary” or “practical”, that is, referential uses. And this critical practice reflects a central distinguishing feature of modern Western poetry, its aesthetic self-sufficiency. Jakobson’s scheme . . . especially those arising from making metaphor the key to poetry, and defining metaphor in opposition to metonymy carries us to the heart of modernist poetry and poetics (ibid: 100).

According to Kroeber, unlike Jakobson, Native Americans in particular and oral culture in general do not operate by polarising ‘prose’ and ‘poetry’. Native American poetry is not an aesthetically self-sufficient unit; there is no questioning
of culture or setting up of an opposition between the poetic self and society. There is often "an conjunction of the intensely personal and private with formal, social, public performance" (ibid: 102). In the following Wintu song, which also reflects the powerful effect generated by slight variation in repetition, the study of the referential context will reveal "an integration of personal psychology and cultural ordering" (ibid: 102):

```
Down west, down west we dance,
  We spirits dance,
Down west, down west we dance,
  We spirits dance,
Down west, down west we dance,
  We spirits weeping dance,
We spirits dance (ibid: 101).
```

The above poem apparently consist of just four elements; "down west" (land of the dead), "spirits", "we dance" and "weeping". This song was sung shortly after the death of the singer’s best friend. The dead friend had appeared in a dream in the company of other female spirits, weeping, dancing and singing this song, which was then sung and danced publicly. The song is not about the dream, but is a part of the dream on the loss of the singer’s personal friend. Yet this subjective sense of loss is submitted to Wintu cultural patterning in its expressive dimension. The dance, the form of the song with the patterning of the lines in a way common to many Wintu songs, and the use of special meaning of certain words, "down west" = "land of the death", conforms to Wintu customs. "Weeping" appears only once and serves as a peg to combine the formal and emotional aspect of the poem. The
structure that "weeping" holds together "is constituted of . . . superimposed repetitions. Not only are the words reiterated, but the singing dancers perform, literally enact, the words, being 'spirits' who dance" (ibid: 101).

The repetition in Native American songs, which is basically reiteration, cannot accommodate the kind of ambiguity and irony that is intrinsically related in the conception of poetic language being metaphorical. Metaphorical language is not the reiteration of a point, but rather internalising language within one's self, a withdrawal and mystification. Extensive repetition runs counter to vivid, original metaphor. Since oral cultures do not operate by polarising prose (non-metaphorical) and poetry (metaphorical), the vivid, original metaphors of western poetic discourse cannot be an integral part of Native American appreciative categories. Colin Turbayne's analyzing the consciousness involved in the metaphoric process, finds that the "use of metaphor involves the pretense that something is the case when it is not," and in making metaphor "we are aware, first, that we are sort-crossing, that is re-representing the fact of one sort in the idiom appropriate to another . . . secondly, that we are treating the world and man as if they belonged to new sorts" (ibid: 103-104). In the sacrosanct use of words to represent truth, Native American poetics cannot be obviously grounded in any process that involves "pretense" and "re-representing". The perils of a metaphorical approach to Native American literature are revealed in Max Black's exposition of the metaphorical implication of calling a man a wolf. To Black,
metaphor is a “theoretical model, a heuristic fiction which can reveal new relationships” and:

The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man 'wolf' is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on . . . Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in 'wolf language' will be rendered prominent and any that cannot will be pushed into the background (ibid: 104).

The Native Americans' understanding of calling a man wolf will be based on totally different precincts. Wolf will be the guardian spirit of the man, who realises “wolf” in his song, because he has been visited by one in a vision. He knows it is a wolf because he has seen one in the wild. And in his song, the physical experience of seeing a wolf interacts with the spiritual experience of his vision and the song will be rendered in a culturally structured situation that conform the individual vision to the socio-religious mores of the tribe. As Paula Gunn Allen has declared, commenting on a Kiowa song, that “statements are not metaphorical . . . for no Indian would take his perception to be the basic unit of consciousness in the universe” (in ibid: 110). Jarold Ramsay in his essay ‘The Hunter’ and the Ecological imagination talks of a Wishram warrior apparently mortally wounded, recovering when a wolf’s bone representing his guardian spirit was displayed to him. The warrior later disclosed “that consequent to his boyhood wolf vision, he saw certain strange weather signs which, if he were to recover now, would reappear. They did and he recovered.” A major premise of Native American culture is the highly desirable acquisition of a guardian spirit and the
quality of an adult’s life was largely determined by “his secret personal commerce with animistic spirits” (Ramsay: 312). Native American poetics links poetry, dream, and power and songs are often telling of dreams and manifests great spiritual potency. Black’s exposition of the implication of calling a man wolf can be understood when it is realised that animals play virtually no part in western poetry. But animals are crucial to Native American poetry because of “the interactiveness between human and animal and their development of a rich, flexible imagining of animal beings” (Kroeber: 329).

Instead of metaphors, most Native American poetry appears to, according to Kroeber, “be built more upon a form of metonymy, synecdoche...” and native poets’ “works by synecdochic omission instead of inventing metaphors” (Kroeber: 104). Kroeber illustrates his point with an Anishinabe example.

Version one is the translated version of the poem based on the informants information, version two is the Anishinabe original and version three is the literal translation of the original:

**Version one**

In the still night, the long hours through,
I guide my bark canoe,
My bark canoe, my love, to you.
While stars shine and fall on the dew,
I seek my love in bark canoe,
In bark canoe, I seek for you.
Who glides the stream in bark canoe;
It glides to you, my love, to you.
Version two
Chekabey
tebik
ondandeyan
chekabey
tebik
ondandeyan
ahgahmah-sibi
ondandeyan

Version three
Throughout
night
I keep awake
gthroughout
night
I keep awake
upon a river
I keep awake.

The literal version of the song was in variance with the meaning of the song put forth by the informant to Fredrick Burton the translator who was told that the song meant "I am out all night on the river seeking for my sweetheart." On being asked what happened to the sweetheart in the literal version, the informant replied that she was not there, and explained the significance of the recurring word onaneyan:

That mean, he said, I keep awake. I get tired, yes, and sleepy, but I no sleep. I keep awake. The word (tebik) is night. Now you see. Why does a man keep awake all night when he want to sleep? . . . Only one reason. I go to find my sweetheart. The words is not there but we understand it.
We know what is meant... we know that the man who made this song was looking for his sweetheart, and we do not need the word here (ibid: 105).

The translator concluded that Anishinabe songs were never “complete in themselves”, each depending “upon something external, a story or ceremony” and he defined Native American song as a “Mnemonic summary”, what Kroeber calls a “synecdoche”. Burton goes on to distinguish Native American literary works by observing that western poetry “is or aims to be self dependent; ... songs are or should be complete in themselves; the Ojibwas’ are consciously incomplete statements of situation, feeling, or events which find expression through them” (ibid: 110). The song is very short because the singer understands and knows much. The synecdochic character of Native American songs facilitates an interactive and participative communication between the audience and the poet-singer-performer. Individual subjective metaphors would impede such a communicative and communal discourse that affirms the total group, tribe or nation as the targeted audience. And because Native American oral derived songs are “socio-cultural synecdoche” it should be approached as an act and not as a text. Native American poems are basically songs that are integral to a “ceremonial situation ... sometimes religious, sometimes secular, sometimes highly formalized, sometimes quite open. But always the Indian poem exists as utterance. It never exists as text, only as act” and the “individual is synecdochic of his tribe and his performance is synecdochic of its culture” (ibid: 106-107). This referentiality or the study of the context of a song-performance is not merely the
physical act of being present, but as Simon Ortiz puts it, “it has to do with the context of the mind . . . The context of a song can be anything or can focus through a specific event or act but it includes all thing” (Gingerich1983: 124). The song is meaningful in the emotional, cultural, spiritual context in which the tribe thrives.

Karl Kroeber in another essay, “Poem, Dream, And The Consuming Of Culture” points out the fallacy of trying to appropriate Native American poetry to the western theory of art which destroys their value “as a counterforce to our habitual fashion of thinking about literary processes”, the inability to “get outside our own literary tradition, which powerfully insists upon its embodiment of universal aesthetic principles” (Kroeber 83b: 326). He illustrates his point by analyzing if it was appropriate for the editor of an anthology to call the following Anishinabe poem “quintessentially modern with its anticipation of Gertrude Stein in the final line, its imagistic thingness/ineffability”:

Whence does he spring
the deer?
Whence does he spring
the deer, the deer, the deer (ibid: 326)?

For analytical purpose Kroeber goes back to the original presentation of the poem by Frances Densmore:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ti'biwenda banog & \quad \text{whence does he dawn?} \\
aiya 'be & \quad \text{the buck?} \\
ti'biwenda banogwen & \quad \text{whence does he dawn?} \\
aiya 'be & \quad \text{the buck?}
\end{align*}
\]
Densmore calls the principal phrase whence does he dawn a "common idiomatic phrase" and likens it to the English expression 'where did he spring from' and translate *aiya'be* as 'the buck', a male deer, an important detail. Kroeber notices that Densmore’s report indicates "less a Stein like triple repetition than 'line one' repetition and ending doublet . . . transformation of Densmore’s original are unconscious effort to make the Indian song conform to the western ideas of the literary"(ibid: 327). But the study of Densmore’s account of the origin and function of the song reveals that it is based on premises rather “antagonistic” to “imagistic” art:

> Long ago an old man made a feast and invited all the men and women. He did not tell them why they were asked; he only said there would be a dance. When they were all assembled the old man who had asked them sang this song, which had come to him in a dream, and another old man led the dance, acting like a deer. The men followed him, acting like the buck deer and the women acted like the doe. In old times hunters had a dance like this in the evening and went out to hunt the deer the next morning (in ibid: 327).

The study of the sequence of the song reveals that the song recorded by Densmore is the repetition of another man’s dream, the function of which in old times was to prepare for a hunt. The present singer not only recollect the original old man’s story of the dream, but “verbally recreates part of it, just as in earlier times other
Indians acted out, danced the dream” (ibid: 327). The song is an explication on how unique and subjective experience can transform into cultural tradition:

Beginning in private dream, part of a personal gift, the song becomes available to others, finally, even to those, ourselves, beyond the culture from which it emerged. Because we receive the song “beyond” its originating culture, any comparison such as the one to Imagism is sure to be falsifying — and to that degree diminishing of the original’s power to let us perceive our own art from a new perspective. For instance, the specific beginning of this Ojibwa traditional song is not exactly identified: it started with an anonymous “old man” sometime “long ago.” The later singer participates in a tradition recreatively, rather than merely reciting a later “version” of some definitely placed original. The Indian tradition is not so purely genetic as our own; origination does not equate with primacy so neatly as in our art (ibid: 328).

While imagistic poetry is more of a visual perception on the printed page, the title used by Densmore for the above poem, Song of the Deer Dancing, directs attention away from the mere visual apprehension of the printed form. The perspective of a dance song intended to engage its “audience in the reenactment of a private dream experience” is the referential periphery within which such poem should be located. The Native American “dramatic lyric is a transactional event, a process by which dream power is realized as cultural potency” (ibid: 328). More often than not, Native American poems emerge from visionary states, where dreams and vision are manifestations of power, a link between “experiences of interior psychic power and external social efficacies” and inner experience is “translated into external, transmissible cultural power” (ibid: 330).
Native American oral-derived literature cannot be grounded against a "literary history" and there is a temporal indefiniteness in the origin of songs and other indigenous forms of artistic expressions. The "long ago" in the old man's account of the Song of the Deer Dancing "is symptomatic of a wholly different concept of the history of art as well as history. Whereas we put stress upon particularised sequences of art works, the Indian, focussing on reenactment, regards specificity of genesis as less important than continuity of power-flow. Hence the repetitiveness in the poem is reflective of the performative repetitiveness which constitutes its persistence as a practical social force (ibid: 331)."