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Review Essay

The Literary Offences of Ruth Beebe Hill

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Hanta Yo: An American Saga. By Ruth Beebe Hill. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1979. 834 pp. $14.95.

As a young person I was an enthusiastic reader of all kinds of works on North American Indians, both fictional and non-fictional. Fairly early in my life I read the romantic works on Indians of James Fenimore Cooper, which of course captivated me, for I was yet a child. Later on, in more mature years, I came upon the splendid essay which Mark Twain wrote on Cooper's Indian tales.[1] The essay was anything but friendly, but delightfully witty, and it certainly gave Cooper what he had coming to him. Cooper's principal failing, in Twain's opinion, was that he was careless with fact (not to say ignorant), but Twain also took him to task for his trite, repetitious style and his dull, uninspired plots.

Mark Twain is unfortunately no longer with us, so we will not be able to benefit from his wit and insight as we attempt to deal with this late 20th century equivalent of the *Leatherstocking*. Although I find Mrs. Hill guilty of many of the same eighteen offences for which Cooper was castigated by the incomparable Mr. Clemens, I nevertheless approach the presentation of the case with great temerity. Mark Twain is a hard act to follow. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made.

Hanta yo is a phony and pretentious book which I find offensive on several levels. It is offensive to a scientist of language because of the naivete (if not ignorance) about language in general which it displays. It is offensive to anyone

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who knows the Dakota language because of the inaccuracies in use and translations which appear throughout the book.

Finally, it is offensive to an intelligent and literate reader because its purple prose is unable to either inform or entertain. Ruth Beebe Hill's characterization of the book as a "classic" and its contents as "the truth" [2] is the ultimate in arrogance or foolishness. Space does not permit a detailed listing of all of the historical, cultural, linguistic, and literary offences which I would charge to Mrs. Hill, but I would like to comment in particular on her attitudes toward language, her use of the Dakota and English languages, and her literary style. I will seek both to refute some of her preposterous claims and her unspoken assumptions in these areas, as well as to point out her failings in the use she has made of each.

According to the dust jacket, *Hanto Yo* "is the story of an original people, a multigenerational saga which reveals for the first time an American Indian culture from the inside. Based on a document recorded on tanned hide by a member of the Mahto band of the Teton Sioux, *Hanta Yo* takes us into the lives of two families of this band and describes their world as it was from the late 1700s to the 1830s, before the white man came onto the red man's territory, before any influencing contact with traders and missionaries."

The central issue in the book is leadership and how it is obtained and used. The major attention is given to Ahbleza, the grandson in a three-generational line. To Ahbleza falls the task of leading his band at the crucial time of its first contact with Euro-Americans. After becoming leader by a triumph of will, Ahbleza foresees the Götterdämmerung of his civilization, but by this heroic death he does not live to see his people subdued and humiliated.

One of the most interesting portions of the book from the point of view of the scholar is Mrs. Hill's own short introduction, where she expresses the philosophy of unbridled individualism which she projects in the book and states (by implication) her beliefs about the nature of thought, language, and culture. Thought and language she believes to be identical: only those thoughts are possible for which particular words exist. Where particular words are lacking (she solemnly presents a list of words said not to exist in Sioux), then corresponding concepts do not and can not exist. Conversely, the world of the speakers of a language is only that part of the

cosmos for which they have linguistic labels. The speakers of every language therefore have a peculiar world of their own. As to language itself, each term is understood denotatively. Speakers are therefore conscious of the literal meaning of each words, and their concept of the word's referent is in terms of the content of the linguistic label.

These premises underlie her whole approach to her literary language, and also evidently motivate her claim that the book was written first in English, then translated into "archaic, pre-reservation Dakota," then back to English. Step one was intended to weed out modern English concepts and to restate the book in the world of 18th century Dakota speakers. Step two was intended to get the "archaic" Indian mentality back into a form intelligible to the English-speaking public she wanted to sell her book to. The claim that such multiple translation is justifiable, and even that it was actually done, is worth examining.

A close reading of the introduction of her Indian collaborator, Mr. Lorenzo Blacksmith, a.k.a. George Smith (identified only as Chunksa Yuha in the book), who did the translation to Dakota, reveals that the principal source of the "archaic, pre-reservation language" is a series of ritual song texts, and the etymological analysis of the words in the texts. To anyone familiar with ritual language and the science of etymology, this claim is startling indeed. Ritual language is always esoteric and obscure, full of deliberately unusual and unfamiliar kennings and metaphors. As a rule, it is unintelligible to the average society member, who must undergo special training if he is to understand and use the language. Moreover, the metaphorical nature of much of ritual vocabulary invites the assumption that *all* vocabulary used in a ritual context has a metaphorical basis.

Because of her belief that ritual language was the real precontact language, Mrs. Hill has the Indian persons in *Hanta Yo* speak constantly about their daily lives in metaphors and kennings, so much so that a special glossary had to be provided to enable the reader to decipher the conversations. Many of the terms there are unknown elsewhere and/or are patently specious because of incorrect etymological analysis. Two of the more laughable of the folk etymologies which I noted are "swims carrying stick" or "swims stick in mouth" for 'beaver' (Dakota *capa*) and "bird who sits smiling at excrement" for

'magpie' (Dakota *unkce kiŋa*). In the case of *capa*, cognate terms exist in all of the western Siouan language (yes, there are some eastern Siouan languages!). The etymology suggested by Hill/Blacksmith ignores crucial phonemic distinctions within Dakota itself in order to be workable, and it is completely unworkable when applied to the other Siouan languages. The 'swim' portion of the etymology is not even represented in *capa*, but supplied, presumably, from the known aquatic habitat of the beaver. I doubt that Mrs. Hill would be flattered to be told that her notions of etymology are also from the 18th century. The etymology suggested for 'magpie' is even more implausible. The correct analysis of the term is 'buries his own dung,' as numerous older informants know and freely acknowledge: *unkce* 'feces,' *kiŋa* 'he buries his own,' *ha* 'to bury.' HIll has ignored the k- of *kiŋa*, and identified the remainder with the verb *iŋa*, 'to smile, to laugh.' [3] Since the expression of reflexive possession is one of the most characteristic features of Siouan languages, if not indeed *the* most characteristic feature, it is hard to believe that Mrs. Hill is the master of the Dakota tongue which she claims to be.

Etymology as a source for information about earlier cultures and/or world views is notoriously prone to error in any event. While the roots of words ordinarily have a meaning related to the meaning of the word containing them, it is by no means necessary that this be the case. Connotations of a given word may be at considerable variance from the meaning of the root; see, for example, the English word *hussy*, which originally meant only 'housewife.' Are we to conclude, on the basis of present meaning, that Old English husbands regarded their wives as sluts? Moreover, a strong reliance on etymological meaning completely begs the question of the origin and use of idioms, which typically differ totally in their global meaning from the meaning of the roots which they contain. What would some future "strict constructionist" of etymology have to say about such English expressions as "the show bombed" and "he kicked the bucket?"

Even if one were to grant that it is possible to translate a work into an extinct, unwritten dialect, there is no reason why it should be translated back into another extinct dialect merely because the latter is theoretically contemporary with the former. What is this supposed to demonstrate? If the difference from his own language is great, the modern reader may be almost as baffled by the "translation" into an earlier form of

his own language as he is by the untranslated original. If the difference between the two speech forms is not great, he will simply read and understand it as a modern text, passing over the occasional items he does not recognize. He will certainly not be aware, in most cases, of meaning changes between the earlier dialect and his present one. The exercise is even more specious when it becomes clear that the source for the "archaic" form of English is an old dictionary. (Note that no other early English source is acknowledged.) I know of no dictionary, ancient or modern, which records more than a fraction of the richness of any living language — its lexical variety, its social and personal registers, its grammatical rules, its phonological details. But Mrs. Hill, like a linguistically naive school marm, seems to feel that a dictionary — in this case the 1806 edition of Webster's dictionary — is the final and only necessary authority in questions of language.

Since this unlikely claim was one amenable to verification, I made careful note as I read *Hanta Yo* of words or expressions which are not contemporary. There were actually fewer than I expected, but a handful such as *chipmungk, horseback* used as a noun and as an adverb, *front* used as an adverb, *nearby* used as a preposition, *marvel* used as a transitive verb, appeared with monotonous regularity. I was quite startled to find none of these in early editions of Webster. *Chipmungk* turns out to be the *phonetic* spelling offered as a pronunciation aid in modern editions of Merriam-Webster. Indeed, the earliest printed use of the word is 1841, with two spellings, neither of them Mrs. Hill's: *chipmunk* and *chipmuck.*[4] *Marvel* is given as a transitive verb in modern editions of Webster's with the indication that it is obsolete. *Horseback* as a noun and adverb, *front* as an adverb, and *nearby* as a preposition do not appear, and I conclude that these are solecisms which originate with Mrs. Hill herself.

Apart from gimmicks such as the above, and a few genuine obsolete vocabulary items, the only striking thing about the English of *Hanta Yo* is its pompous diction, its unusual use of English tenses, and the occasional unusual placement of the adverb *not.* Whenever the speech or thoughts of Indian characters is given, verbs are frequently only present or future tense in form:

> "The son of Olepi not yet convinces me that truly he has enough." . . . "His father hears him say more than once that he will not make ties with any

> warrior-lodge." . . . "Or will Olepi really intend to die?"

This may be an effort to convey the real versus hypothetical dichotomy which all Dakota predications must show. However, it is silly to assume that these are the only tenses a Sioux speaker is aware of, since very subtle distinctions can be made by accompanying adverbs and adverbial particles. In fact, the Indian speaker can be as specific about time and time sequences as can the English speaker. My conclusion, based on knowledge of the two languages, but also on a handful of examples in the book where the same sentence is given in both Sioux and English, is that her peculiar use of the tenses and *not* is a conscious effort to create a non-English-like syntax intended to mark thoughts and utterances framed originally in Dakota. A further conclusion is that the alleged two stage translation was not really done at all. Rather, it seems clear that the original version of the novel was simply doctored up here and there in purely mechanical ways to make it appear to reflect more closely the presumed cognitive world and speech habits of the Dakota characters.

For anyone knowing something about the sociology of language, Mrs. Hill's treatment of dialect phenomena is also naive and implausible. Characters identified as Lakotas frequently use words which clearly belong, by their form, to the Dakota dialect of the Dakota language.[5] Examples are *śonktanka* 'horse' and *pinspinza* 'prairie dog' which are, respectively, *śonkawakan* and *pispiza* in Lakota. The reason for this casual and improbable dialect mixture is Mrs. Hill's belief that the Dakota dialect is the "original" dialect and that the Lakota dialect was in the process of evolving from it during the time period represented in her novel. This reflects a common misconception that some forms of language are more "original" than others. The fact is that *all* languages and dialects are differentiated forms of earlier languages and dialects; some forms *may* be more conservative than others, but this can only be determined by rigorous comparative study using scientific techniques unfamiliar to most laymen. In the case of the Dakota and Lakota dialects, both are about equally conservative when compared with Pre-Dakota and Proto-Siouan, so that neither can be said to be more "original" than the other. The only bases for assigning some kind of seniority to the

Dakota dialect are historical and social: Lakota speakers are known to have moved away from the neighborhood of Dakota speakers during the late prehistoric period, and Dakota speakers were contacted by Europeans earlier than speakers of other Sioux dialects. The consequence of the latter is that the Dakiota dialect speakers began the process of assimilation (e.g. Christianization) earlier than speakers of the other dialects. This gave the Dakota speakers a prestige in the early contact period which had nothing to do with their dialect and aboriginal culture, and everything to do with the fact that they had become the cultural and commercial intermediaries between the Euro-Americans and their more western cousins. There is not a shred of evidence that they were regarded by other Sioux speakers as "grandfathers" or "elder brothers" before the 19th century. And the Lakota and Nakota dialects certainly arose earlier than the late 18th century. There is no reason to believe, in fact, that they are any younger than the Dakota dialect itself.

Besides instances of implausible dialect mixture, a fair number of words are used in *Hanta Yo* which are not found in *any* Sioux dialect. Three examples of this are *canpahmiyan, hecitu,* and *pta.* The first of these, meaning 'wagon' is actually *canpahmihma* in Dakota, *canpagmiyan* in Lakota, and *canpakmiyan* in Nakota. *hecitu* 'that is right, so be it' is *hecetu* in all Sioux dialects. *pta,* glossed as 'male buffalo, a herd father,' while very plausible in form and meaning, has actually never been recorded by lexicographers, and is unknown to contemporary Sioux speakers.

Some instances of this kind may actually be transcriptional blunders, of which there is a fairly large number in *Hanta Yo.* For example, the subscript dot used to mark glottalization in the Riggs orthography is used quite erratically. *śice,* glossed as 'a woman's brother-inlaw,' should be spelled *śîce* in the Riggs system. Without the subscript dot the word means 'is bad.' *tagoża* is given for 'grandchild,' whereas the correct spelling should be *takoża.* Erros of this kind are inexcusable, since the Riggs and Williamson dictionaries are readily available, and Hill is supposedly familiar with Riggs' scholarship and herself an authority on the Sioux language.

Apart from merely absurd translations, there is also a goodly number of glosses which end up being incorrect because they are imprecise. Particularly noticeable in this

respect are glosses for kin terms. *hunku,* for example, is glossed as 'someone else's mother'; the correct meaning is 'mother of a singular third person: his mother, her mother.' *ina* is listed as meaning 'mother,' which it does, but it can only be used as a term of address, it is never used referentially. *lekśi* is glossed as 'woman's term for uncle'; the correct translation is 'brother of one's mother, maternal uncle.' The term can be used by either males or females, but the reference can only be to a blood uncle in the maternal line. The father's brother is called *ate* 'father,' a term used in the book as a personal name (Ahte) but not listed in the glossary.

Another linguistic and cultural offence is the jumble of genuine personal names, kin terms, and generic nouns which serve as names for the characters in *Hanta Yo.* Beside *Peśla* ('bald head'), *Mahtola* ('little bear') and *Peta* ('fire') which could have been personal names, we find kin terms such as *tunkaśila* ('grandfather'), *ahte* ('father'), *ina* ('mother'), *cuwe* ('older sister of a woman'), and generic nouns such as *winkte* ('berdache, transvestite male'), *wanaġi* ('spirit'), *tonweya* ('scout'), *winu* ('wife by capture'), *eyanpaha* ('herald') used as personal names where they would only have served as vocatives or nicknames at best.

All of the examples in the preceding paragraphs are typical of the "home-made" character of Mrs. Hill's anthropology and linguistics, and are inexcusable in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, when kinship systems and North American social systems and most North American aboriginal languages still spoken are relatively well-known and well described. Although she claims almost forty years of research for the book, and a bibliography of hundreds of items, she nevertheless dismisses professional work in anthropology, linguistics, and ethnohistory which fails to agree with her own naive but fiercely held convictions. Her plea to her readers to enter the Dakota world without vanity evidently does not apply to herself.

A glance back across what I have written will show that most of my criticism of *Hanta Yo* has been of a very technical nature. Failings of the kind I have indicated do not usually trouble the popular reader, who might characterize my criticism as mere nit picking. Intelligent and literate readers will nevertheless surely find *Hanta Yo* wanting on purely literary grounds, as do I as well. In my opinion, the book is a classic of poor writing. It is repetitious and overly long,[6] and it distorts and trivializes what it attempts to present sympa-

thetically. It is a propagandistic work which perpetuates prescientific, romantic myths about language, culture, and American Indians which are better forgotten.

Fiction does not have to be a completely accurate reflection of reality, but it behooves the writer of fiction to distort as little as possible. Skilled and successful historical novelists who deal with unfamiliar places and times must be very careful to make adjustments for their readers so that the latter can capture the essential humanity of the characters. Against a background of historical and cultural fact and allusion, a good writer permits his protagonists to behave as human beings would within the constraints of their culture. It is not easy to keep the cultural background under control, to introduce and explain just the right amount to lead the reader to an understanding of, and sympathy for, the characters. Probably the most offensive facet of this grotesque book is the deluge of irrelevant, unexplicated cultural information, almost all of which is incomprehensible to someone not already well acquainted with Plains Indian culture.

In sum, the claim that *Hanta Yo* is the first time presentation of an American Indian culture from the inside could not be further from the truth. Instead, *Hanta Yo* is a partisan and tendentious broadside[7] which is well within the mainstream of Euro-American thought and which has its own philosophical roots in the German romantic tradition of the 19th century. Its philosophy owes far more to Wilhelm von Humboldt and *The Romantic Manifesto*[8] than to any Dakota grandfathers, putative or real. As such, it is no more real truth about Native Americans than are *Hiawatha* and *The Leatherstocking Tales.* It is merely the latest of a long line of potboilers which take an Indian theme and use it to present a European viewpoint.

Mark Twain's final word about the *Deerslayer* bears repeating here, for it could almost have been written about *Hanta Yo:* "A work of art? It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result; it has no lifelikeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality; its characters are confusedly drawn, and by their acts and words they prove that they are not the sort of people the author claims that they are; its humor is pathetic; its pathos is funny; its conversations are — oh! indescribable; its love-scenes odious; its English a crime against the language. Counting these out, what is left is Art. I think we must all admit that."

NOTES

1. Twain's essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" originally appeared in the *North American Review*, July, 1895, pp. 1-12; it has been reprinted numerous times since.

2. See, for example, the *New York Times Book Review*, March 25, 1979; and *Newsweek*, April 16, 1979.

3. Voltaire's famous dictum that etymology is a science in which the vowels count for nothing and the consonants for very little comes immediately to mind. Fortunately, Voltaire's opinion is no longer true: present-day etymologists are as rigorous as other scientists.

4. *Dictionary of American English*, William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

5. I am using *language* and *dialect* here in a technical sense. A *language* is a speech form distinct from all others and which is mutually intelligible to a group of people regardless of some variation in usage across the entire community. A *dialect* is a speech form which is clearly a *subtype* of a language. That is, although it has most of the characteristics of the language of which it is a part, it nevertheless has noticeable and consistent characteristics of its own. A dialect is always the result of the independent development of that part of the community which speaks it. Usually the independent development is caused by the isolation of the speakers, either because of geographic separation or social isolation. The Sioux, or Dakota language has traditionally been regarded as having three dialects: Dakota (Santee), Lakota (Teton), and Nakota (Yankton). New dialect surveys done in 1978 and 1979 indicate that there are actually more dialects — or subdialects — depending on the degree of difference required to constitute a separate entity. Hill's frequent reference to "Dakotah/Lakotah dialect" is hence meaningless. It is comparable to saying "American/Australian dialect."

6. Hill asserts that this was done deliberately, to make sure that it would be "totally alien to the jet world" (*Newsweek*, April 16, 1979). Her assertion that the book is dry and repetitious must be virtually her only statement about *Hanta Yo* which has not been challenged by someone.

7. I think that many readers and critics have not sufficiently appreciated the extent to which *Hanta Yo* is an ideological statement. The shrillness of Mrs. Hill's reaction to criticism is difficult to understand otherwise. There is abundant additional evidence that her intention was at least as partisan as literary, cf. her denigration of "altruism," ("His view was never that of an altruist," author's introduction), "collectivism" ("Any archaic Indian language of any tribe doesn't have collectivist terms," *Denver Post*, April 10, 1979), and her praise of egoism (" 'I,' the sacred word," author's introduction). Her dedication to egoism even influences her translation of Sioux grammatical morphemes. The personal prefex *on-*, when not pluralized, means 'the two of us,' when pluralized, 'we.' (As such, *on* should certainly qualify as a collectivist term, unless I do not understand what collectivist means!) The usual translation of this prefex is 'you and I,' observing the accepted convention in English of final placement of the first person pronoun. Throughout the book Mrs. Hill has 'I and you' wherever there is a conversation between two interlocutors. Her assertion that the concepts *we*, *us*, and *them* (author's introduction) do not exist in Dakota is nonsense.

Personal affixes with these meanings exist and are used constantly. Moreover, comparative evidence shows that the affixes also existed in Proto-Siouan, which has a time depth of hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

8. Ayn, Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature* (New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1969). Consider the following two very revealing passages from Chapter 10 of this work:

> "The motive and purpose of my writing is *the projection of an ideal man*. The portrayal of a moral ideal, as my ultimate literary goal, as an end in itself — to which any didactic, intellectual or philosophical values contained in a novel are only the means" (page 161).
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> ". . . fiction is of greater philosophical importance than history, because history represents things only as they are, while fiction represents them 'as they *might be* and *ought to be*' " (page 169.)