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Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians. From Performances in the Zuni by Andrew Peyneta and Walter Sanchez. By Dennis Tedlock, trans.

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ness to mingle written and oral forms make this reviewer hope that the Bear inside Gerald Vizenor continues to laugh and to share his dreams and visions with us.

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Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians. From Performances in the Zuni by Andrew Peynetsa and Walter Sanchez. By Dennis Tedlock, trans. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978. 298 pp. \$4.50.

Dennis Tedlock's most recent edition¹ of *Finding the Center*, a collection of ten Zuni tales interspersed with black-and-white graphics, does not merely represent another recording of Pueblo Indian material similar to the myths gathered by the Boasian anthropologists Ruth L. Bunzel and Ruth Benedict in the 1930's,² but primarily illustrates a change in attitude toward Indian culture and its significance for contemporary literature and society. While the earlier versions as well as most modern renderings of oral narratives were published in prose format, Tedlock, dissatisfied by the gap between the spontaneity of the narrator's performance and the rigidity of the written prose presentation, searched for a form that would more adequately reproduce the poetic "singsong"-quality of the Zuni stories.³

Obviously he recognizes the affinity between the role of the Indian storyteller and the goal of "Objectism" in "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, . . . that peculiar presumption by which Western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature . . . and those other creations of nature."⁴ Tedlock in his preface refers to Charles Olson's statements on "projective verse," specifically to his emphasis on the relevance of the human voice and the predominance of the ear over the eye as a "measurer" for poetry. In analogy to the "objectist" notion of the poem as a high-energy construct which is infused with kinetic force by "breath," he adapted devices from "concrete poetry" to the Indian texts. Stressing the importance of silence, he broke the Zuni narratives into lines and marked the pauses by strophe-breaks. In the introduction to the Bison edition, he explains the few standard typographic devices he chose to indicate the vocal modulations

which the two Zuni narrators used to provide their stories with dramatic features.

Whereas tape-recording would have delivered a more accurate rendition of the oral performance, Tedlock employs this particular mode of presentation in order to avoid an inert, canned version of the Zuni tales. Instead he invites the reader to give up his passive position and to take over the active role of the Indian story-teller. Since the Zunis, contrary to many other Indian tribes, do not consider the right of story-telling a sacred privilege, reserved to a particular group, Tedlock's attempt to involve the reader actively in the narrative process is in accordance with an attitude that kept Zuni folklore from extinction.⁵ By providing a guide to reading the poetry aloud and a key to the pronunciation of an original Zuni version, which he includes in the book, he further encourages the reader to experiment with the imaginative experience of story-telling, an act which should be shared by a responsive audience. Indian cultures attribute extreme importance to it⁶ because the re-enactment of a traditional tale does not only preserve its valued contents and the transmission of historical or cultural information, but also represents a form of emotional and mental self-realization, since it links the narrator and the audience with their tribal tradition and at the same time instigates their power of imagination.

The apparent discrepancy between the high formalization of conventional Zuni tales and the antiformalist request for "openness" in verse is only a superficial one. It is partly compensated by the similarity of the primitive narrator's performing techniques and "objectist" prosody. Furthermore, Zuni folklore allows for a considerable degree of variation and individual self-expression despite the frequent intertwining of archaic formulas as it permits the story-teller to combine a large number of incidents which are stock-property with his personal knowledge and experience. He proves his artistic skill by building plot sequences that grasp the audience's attention out of ritual language, conventional themes and innumerable cultural details. A comparison between *Finding the Center* and R. Benedict's *Zuni Mythology*, one of the most comprehensive anthologies of Zuni material, shows that Tedlock selected from the 100 stories he gathered in New Mexico a representative collection, incorporating traditional motifs from Zuni mythology like the emergence story, the stock-saga of the Ahayuuta, the assistance given by animals, or the Kachinas, the contest with the witches and the coming into being of the Medicine Societies. The originality of the present collection demonstrates the Zuni narrator's ability to invent new plots which bear his personal mark. These distinguishing traits, which render the stories more alive, are preserved, and their effect is heightened, since Tedlock

does not eliminate errors or repetitions resulting from a narrator's uncontrolled performance.

The attempt to preserve the unity and the "live" quality of the oral texts induced Tedlock to prefer a particular form of poetry to that of drama and to refrain from giving extensive stage directions. Although these might have further restricted the already limited role of the reader as story-teller, supplementary information on the Indian narrator's gestures and facial expressions might have contributed to a fuller comprehension of the stories whose meaning remains at times obscure, particularly when it refers to specific tribal customs or mythological figures. An alphabetical or at least a more systematic listing of the reference notes which are added to each text would also have made the understanding easier.

However, the experience of the 60's, which provided contact with Eastern mysticism, popularized psychoanalytic theories as well as mind-expanding drugs, and propagated the return to a more "primitive" way of life, prepared the present-day audience to enjoy and intuitively understand tales which are in many respects alien to their own Western thinking. The extraordinary form of Tedlock's "transpositions" further facilitates the non-Indian reader's effort to divest himself of the culturally conditioned expectations as to what a myth or a tale should be like and what should happen in it.

No longer considering ethnic literature a mere historical record or sociological reference material, the anthropologist Dennis Tedlock, co-editor of *Alcheringa*, the journal of the ethno poetic movement, chose an approach that reflects the philosophy of the ethno poets.⁷ Striving for new modes of perception and a revised stance to reality that abandons the conscious self as ultimate parameter, the ethno poets turned to primitive cultures and the alleged predominance of the communal spirit as well as the idealized harmony of primitive man with his natural environment. Undoubtedly, their endeavor to revive traditional oral texts through avant-garde techniques has modified contemporary attitudes to alien cultures and evoked a much needed respect for primitive civilization. However, the danger of a new emergence of the "noble savage" cliché should not be ignored.

While many Plains Indians might value the ecstatic experience of extreme emotional and mental conditions,⁸ Zuni culture emphasizes the concept of harmony and balance, which is also reflected in the name of their geographical site: "Middle Place," supposedly located in the center of the universe. The title *Finding the Center* obviously alludes to this notion of measure, but it also implies a mystic ethno poetic thrust in the healing powers of Indian tradition. There is no doubt that modern

Western man might learn from the ancient Indian's awareness of his physical environment and from his communal life-style, but it should not be overlooked that contemporary Indian societies will not benefit from a lifeless, idealized prototype. The disappointment in Western values, particularly lamented in the America of the 1960's, resulted in a new stereotypical image of *the Indian*. Presented as the original ecologist and non-competitive communist who, because of his pre-scientific wisdom, could live in perfect harmony with the universe if not hampered by the white man, this superhuman ideal will not contribute to the actual solution of socio-economic problems. Nevertheless, Tedlock's selection of texts might lead to a deeper understanding of Indian civilization by endowing the reader-performer with the native narrator's poetic vision through his personal re-enactment of the original process of creation.

NOTES

1. Originally published with a preface by Jerome Rothenberg (New York: Dial Press, 1972).

2. Ruth L. Bunzel, *Zuni Texts*, Publications of the American Ethnological Society, No. 75 (Washington, 1933); Ruth Benedict *Zuni Mythology*, 2 vols., Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, No. 21 (New York 1935).

3. Not yet able to profit from the advantages of a tape-recorder, Benedict also regretted that she could not recapture this specific quality.

4. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in, Donald M. Allen, ed, *The New American Poetry* (New York 1960), p. 395. Compare also pp. 386-97.

5. This does not mean that there are no rules or secrets with regard to certain stories. The "telapnaawe," for instance, should only be told from October to March at night; and one of the Zuni narrators refused to repeat a song of his Medicine Society when he spoke about its origin.

6. For the significance of story-telling in this context see N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," in, Abraham Chapman, ed., *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations* (New York 1975), pp. 96-110. "The state of human *being* is an idea, an idea which man has of himself. Only when he is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself. . . . this is to say that man achieves the fullest realization of his humanity in such an art and product of the imagination as literature—and here I use the term 'literature' in its broadest sense" (p. 104). See also Dennis Tedlock, "Toward a Restoration of the Word in the Modern World," *Alcheringa*, 2(2), (1976): 120-132.

7. For an extensive discussion of ethnopoetics, see Reinhold Schiffer, "Ethnopoetics: Some Aspects of American Avant-Garde Primitivism," *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 9(1), (1979): 39-51.

8. Cf. Sun-Dance Ceremonies, especially Sioux self-torture, or mourning rites like the self-mutilation of Blackfeet women.

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Mythological Tales And The Allegany Seneca: A Study of the Socio-Religious Context of Traditional Oral Phenomena in an Iroquois Community. By Thomas McElwain. Almqvists and Wiksell International; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1978. 118 pp. \$17.00.

The Iroquois have long enjoyed renown for their oratorical skill, and their reputation continues to be well deserved. Verbal art, from monumental ceremonial speeches lasting for days, to the everpresent humor drawn from intricate plays on words, has traditionally been appreciated and cultivated among the Seneca in particular. For this reason, Seneca oratory is an especially fertile and important area for study. In his *Mythological Tales and the Allegany Seneca*, Thomas McElwain examines a set of traditional tales in their cultural context, analyzing their composition, performance, and function, then draws conclusions concerning various social and religious aspects of Allegany community life.

Part I of the book situates the Allegany community historically, geographically, and culturally. Criteria for group membership and concepts of ethnic and religious identity are discussed. The primary religious dichotomy in the community is examined, that between the traditional Longhouse religion, whose prophet is Handsome Lake, and Christianity. The author proposes that the dichotomy is superficial, resting solely on congregational affiliation and terminology for the Creator. Both share a common foundation of native Iroquois traditions, which include a harmonious world view, personal independence beside community obligation, and active, pragmatic religious practices rather than pious but passive observation. Formal parallels are drawn between the traditional Thanksgiving address and Christian prayer.

Field techniques and questions of ethics involved in working with individuals and in observing Longhouse ceremonies are considered at length. A statistical approach is taken to the investigation of the effects