Primitive and Modern: Some Translations

David MURRAY - University of Nothingham
Inglaterra

The ultimate focus of this essay is on a series of translations and reworkings of a very brief North American Indian song into a poem, but in order to set up the terms in which these translations should be seen I will need to give some context, both in views of translation and in the particular cultural context in which Modernist artists encountered and appropriated aspects of 'primitive' cultures. As I shall be using the idea of translation in its widest cultural sense as well as in a literary context, it may be worth reminding the reader of some of the broad changes that have taken place in approaches toward translation, which allow me to include a wider cultural dimension than is perhaps normal.

The idea of equivalence, which has tended to dominate discussions of translation over the years, has involved a concentration on lining up individual words and finding as close a similarity in meaning as possible. As has often been pointed out, of course, the ability to recognise equivalence implies a third term or category within which they can be aligned. There is also an inevitable progression out from the word, to phrase, to sentence, and in the end to cultural contexts – in other words to an awareness of the many frames within which any question of equivalence needs to be seen. This move out from word to culture is also linked to the tendency now to talk about source and target languages

or cultures. This allows the focus to move to the ways in which a word or sentence operates in the target language and by extension how the particular needs of the target group are being served by particular translations. This clearly can then connect up with Foucauldian ideas of discourse but can also show how transformation and invention in translation has a cultural significance rather than being merely a regrettable falling away from the ideal of equivalence and transparency of translation. In this way the focus has changed from the way a translation is appropriate (i.e. fitting – in this case fitting neutrally and invisibly between two languages) to the ways in which it can appropriate or even expropriate (that is make something its own.) And my question in this essay is, to work this particular pun to death, which is the *proper* approach to take to Indian translations – appropriateness or appropriation? And can we separate the two?

Before we look at specific instances, though, we need to look at the full cultural implications of the encounter with the primitive in early Modernism. James Clifford, has described the category of the primitive as "an incoherent cluster of qualities that at different times have been used to construct a source, origin or alter-ego confirming some new 'discovery' within the territory of the Western self"[1]. Elsewhere primitivism has been described as standing for "that aspect of the romantic movement which is based on the assumption that there exists a form of humanity which is integral, is cohesive, and works as a totality. Since this totality is always defined as a critical opposite to the present, it is always a representation of a primitive 'other'[2].

In early Modernism this appeal to the primal, the unified, the universal can be seen at the level of form, as in the interest in abstracted and purified lines, and links up with a rejection of what was seen as a fussy and cluttered art of the West. So we get a rhetoric of the fundamental, simple, pure, an anti-aesthetic which corresponds very closely to the new celebration of the machine, so that this too is a sort of primitivism, as in Vorticism and Futurism. Edward Stieglitz's 291 exhibition of

African Sculpture, for instance, was reported in *The World* in 1915 under the heading 'African Savages the First Futurists'.[3] The stress on form and stripping down was only one aspect, of course, though most often stressed through Picasso's use of African masks, but the encounter with primitive objects in the Trocadero, and elsewhere, was more varied. The Surrealists, for instance, were more interested in Oceania, and in the N.W. Coast of America, and if we look at the Surrealist map of the world we see that it is these areas that are huge and dwarf both Europe and most of Africa.

In general, though we can say that for European artists and writers the engagement with the primitive in this period was one which stressed the primal, the elemental, whether at the level of form, as in Cubism of the shamanistic performances of Hugo Ball, or the unconscious of Surrealism. What they had in common was an appropriation of objects and elements from other cultures in such a way as to elide and avoid the issue of their historical and political relation to them. This happens in two ways. First, in positing these people as a totality, as organic and static, you are able to use any piece of work metonymically and see it as primal, universal and *original*. Secondly, once you see it that way you can ignore the historical contingencies of colonialism. In fact, pure tribal objects, songs, and myths did have histories, and often even individual named producers, but it is part of what Johannes Fabian calls the denial of coevalness to posit a place outside history, an ethnografic present.[4]

So the need to find a pure origin is linked in complex ways with the denial of the historical complicity with the realities of colonial exploitation. When we turn our attention to North America it is easy at one level to pick out the similarities, the taking over of European concerns, as in Stieglitz's exhibition of African sculpture, and the influence of trips to Europe on so many painters, but the differences are more interesting. Marsden Hartley, for instance, while in Europe and under the influence of Cubism, painted a series of paintings using American Indian motifs, which he called 'Amerika' (around 1914). What

I find interesting, though, is that he spells America with a K, as in German, but to my ears it also sounds more primitive or exotic.[5] So it's like seeing what is primitive in America through European eyes, and of course a similar commodification of another aspect of America was going on with black music, which was being *presented* as primitive, and exotic, though this important area is outside the terms of this essay.

Under a European influence, then, white American artists and patrons *could* take two aspects of America, Indians and blacks, and subject them to the same decontextualising and dehistoricising operation in order to make them serve as primitive, and primal, and to some extent they did. But it is not so easy for them to make America into Amerika, because the relation to these primitive others is not that of France or England to distant colonies, but a much closer and more ambiguous relation, stretching over centuries and deeply involved with the actual identity of Americans. The European use of both blacks and Indians to represent America, to stand metonymically for its primal and original energies could not be so easily adapted by Americans. What happens, I would suggest, is that the presence of real blacks in America, and the unavoidable historical and political reality of racism and segregation made it impossible, apart from a few tries, to identify them easily with the African qualities that were being celebrated in Europe. In the case of Indians, though, it was easier. There was already a framework in which the Indian was both a symbol of America (appearing on coins and so on) and representing the original and natural, and at the same time that which, under America's manifest destiny has to be effaced and removed in order for America to exist as historical, modern nation.

As a result, then, the Indian is much more acceptable and usable as primitive than the black, and it is interesting that both Marsden Hartley (of 'Amerika') and Max Weber (the American painter, of course, not the sociologist) wrote articles calling for a new American aesthetic based on Indian artistic values. In 'Red Man Ceremonials: An American Plea for American Aesthetics' Hartley argued that 'We are not nearly so

original as we fool ourselves into thinking... We have the excellent encouragement of redman aesthetics to establish ourselves firmly with an aesthetic of our own.'[6] The complex meanings of 'original' here, and the transition from 'red man' to 'our own' need only be noted. Hartley was also a prolific poet, contributing poems to Harriet Monroe's magazine *Poetry* which in 1917 had a special issue on American Indian poetry or Aboriginal poetry, as it called it, 'not translations but interpretations'. It was a strange mixture, but one of the contributors, Mary Austin, is interesting in the claims she makes in her later volume of Indian poetry which she called 're–expressions', *The American Rhythm*.[7] She finds in American Indian song a rhythm which is formed from an engagement with the land of America itself, and is therefore potentially sharable by all the later Americans, 'the very pulse of emerging American consciousness'.(p.11) In an earlier essay she had rejoiced that

> Probably never before has it occured that the intimate thought of a whole people should be made known through its most personal medium to another people whose unavoidable destiny it is to carry that thought to fulfilment and make of that medium a characteristic literary vehicle.[8]

This gives it a universal, transhistorical quality, which would be 'the means by which men and their occasions are rewoven from time to time with their allness; and who is there to tell me that this, in art, is not the essence of modernity?' (p.57) This reweaving and unifying is crucial, as is the stress on the communal, and it is interesting to notice that she manages to define the positive effects of rhythm in such a way as almost to exclude jazz. 'The Amerind', she says, 'admit none of the bond–loosening, soul–disintegrating, jazz–born movements of Mr Sandburg's '*Man Hunt*' which would lead to 'spiritual disintegration'. She is obviously bothered about how to cope with jazz, and returns to it later in a long footnote. As jazz is a 'reversion' to our earlier responses it could create disintegration, which would make 'an excessive exclusive indulgence in jazz as dangerous as the moralists think it' whereas an intelligent use of it 'might play an important part in that unharnessing of traditional

inhibitions of response indispensible to the formation of a democratic society'. I think this is in code, and really implies that jazz is acceptable when used by whites, (intelligently) but when 'indulged in' as by blacks, is bad, whereas there are no such reservations about Indian rhythms. In this she reflects the curious way in which jazz, when it was attacked, was said to be both mechanical and primitive, raising the spectre of a disintegrating modernity as well as a bestial savagery.

An adequate account of the differing uses of Indian and black in terms of the primitive is beyond the scope of this essay, so I want now to concentrate on just one example of how Indian materials are used and appropriated within preexisting cultural categories of Western Modernism. While Indian myths and narratives and songs had been translated for centuries, and in the 19th century the idea of primitive eloquence exemplified in the phenomenon of Ossian had given a framework in which they could be seen as 'poetic', the particular Modernist artistic preoccupations meant a different conception of the poetic, and therefore a different treatment of Indian materials from the earlier Romanticism. In particular the activities of the 'salvage ethnographers' meant a potentially huge source of materials, but these materials were initially pretty forbidding for poets schooled in concepts of beauty and simplicity. To take just one example, the ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore was busy recording and transcribing one of the largest collections of Indian music, much of it published at the time in scholarly form by the Bureau of American Ethnology, where the songs appeared in transcription with a literal and then a looser translation, and in some cases even accompanied by a drawing made by the singer, reflecting the subject of the song.

If we look at these raw materials in Densmore or in the huge collections of Franz Boas and George Hunt, typically consisting of a phonetic transcription of the original language, with an interlinear translation and detailed ethnographic notes, it does not look immediately promising.

Because of developments associated with Imagism, though, there was an interest in the single image of the conjunction of images. Ezra Pound had published Ernest Fenollosa's 'The Chinese Written Character As a Medium for Poetry' and had been intrigued by the idea of the concreteness and the use of juxtaposition in what he (mainly wrongly) conceived to be method of ideogrammic writing. The precision and concreteness of the short *haiku*, too, consisting of a specific number of syllables, was influential, but Pound had also chosen one of the most fragmentary bits of Sappho and produced a three word poem. In other words using other cultures he was developing an aesthetics of the fragment, which of course connects up with larger elements in Modernism. The poetic was seen to reside in the understated, the concrete. So we have a set of practices in place which can be used to quarry out a certain sort of poem from a complex set of material, such as Densmore's. Let us follow the process.

In Densmore's lengthy study of Chippewa music, for instance, we find several pages given over to the notation of the melody, phonetic transcription of the words, details of the Chippewa singer, Mary English, and details of the geographical and historical setting. There is also a literal translation, set out alongside the Chippewa phrases, which appears on the page as follows. (I omit the Chippewa after the first two indicative lines. A loon, incidentally is a waterbird.)

Manodug'win ..... A loon
Nin'dinen'um ..... I thought it was
But it was
My love's
Splashing oar

To Sault Ste Marie
He has departed
My love
Has gone on before me
Never again
Can I see him.[9]

Densmore adds that 'part 3 is similar to part 1', giving us a song with a repeated refrain set in a specific location. But here is how it soon appears in a collection of Indian 'poetry'.

Love Song
(Chippewa)

A loon I thought it was

But it was

My love's

Splashing oar.[10]

It has gained a title, but lost its second verse and repeat, and yet in a footnote on the same page it is praised for being so spare and minimalist!

> This lovely poem, composed of but a few words, though full of overtones and hints of things unsaid, bears such a strange resemblance to those exquisite little poems of classic Japanese literature that I cannot refrain from calling the reader's attention to this fact. In order to understand part of the American Indian's poetry one must be well trained in swiftly reacting upon the faintest suggestions, intimations and symbols. He very often gives only the mere outline of a fleeting mood or of the lasting impression of an experience.

It is also interesting to note that Carl Sandburg, in the issue of Poetry mentioned above, following Densmore more closely, but inventing a different title, 'My Love Has Departed' comments that 'Suspicion arises that the Red Man and his children committed direct plagiarisms on the modern imagists and vorticists.'[11] Clearly there is irony in his remark, but it is hard to know how much of the joke he was really aware of. This is just one of many instances of the way a poem is as much created as translated, but my main point here is not primarily to criticise these poems for lack of equivalence, but to show the importance of the target group and its cultural predispositions. Nevertheless the question does arise about the adequacy of what's happening here, on all sorts of levels,

because even if I am not concerned with whether these are equivalents, most of the poets here certainly claim to be, and this needs following up. What is being celebrated is very well revealed in something W.B. Yeats said about Rabindranath Tagore's own translation of his poetry into English – which now strikes us as rather mushy and Victorian in tone.

> A whole people, a whole civilisation, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination: and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness but because we have met our own image, as if we had walked in Rossetti's willow woods or heard for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.[12]

Poetry is thus seen as the universal communicator, which gives licence to the translator or editor to concentrate on an irreducible essence. One of the editors of a collection of Indian poems puts it quite clearly

> My only criterion has been to make the lines feel good, moving? I have tried to pay no attention whatever to the value of a given piece as ethnological information or for that matter to its religious or historical significance. I have tried to approach each line exactly as I might a line of Sappho's, only as literature.[13]

He then justifies his stripping off of repetition, on the grounds that

> some images otherwise beautiful to us lie buried all but out of sight in repetition.... In the buffalo songs, for instance, it would not only be wearisome to follow faithfully all the magic numbers but we might also, who knows materialize a buffalo. We don't really want the buffalo... All that we want from any of it is the feeling of its poetry.

What we are faced with here is a very prevalent response, and one which could be seen very clearly in a much later manifestation in a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 80's, which juxtaposed the Modern and Primitive. The key term used by the organisers appears in the title, 'Affinities of the Tribal and Modern' but

a lot of the discussion and criticism it generated was about the ultimately dehistoricising and essentialising activity that was going on. One line of critique for instance went along the lines of Hal Foster:

> However progressive once, this election to our humanity is now thoroughly ideological for if evolutionism subordinated the primitive to western history, affinity–ism recoups it under the sign of western universality.[14]

In other words the appeal to a common humanity expressed in a common form called art or the aesthetic is too contaminated by what has always in the past been smuggled in under the guise of humanist universalism. If we accept this line, though, we are left with a dilemma. Is it possible to have any response to something really other, really different? If we don't have an experience of recognition, don't we in fact have a reaction which in ideological terms is more worrying, a sort of frisson, an aesthetics of the unnameable, a modern aesthetics of the sublime? In translation terms then we could say that the Modernist versions I've looked at actually rework them for a target audience, while claiming, via the universalising and essentialising idea of art, that they are involved in accurate equivalence–finding. If this approach has increasingly appeared untenable it does not mean that other directions have been without their contradictions and difficulties. One way is to aim for fuller accuracy by expanding the frame, by giving more ethnographic detail.[15] The other is much more consciously to be aware of the target audience and make reworkings, which do not claim accuracy. Both approaches have now invoked the idea of dialogue and collaboration as a way out of the inequality of power in this situation, but this raises a whole other set of questions, and maybe serves only to disguise the ideological investment in this material, in getting what the modernists would have called 'the spirit of the original'.

Perhaps it is right, given the complexity of power–relations between cultures, that there should be no short–cuts through this particular cultural minefield, and any claims to get the spirit or essence of another

culture should be suspect. If I now return to my original question about appropriation, it is merely to offer a reminder of the tangle of meanings around the ideas of proper and propriety and property, which are raised in any discussion of appropriation, whether it is the use of a poem, or as in early trading or conquest, the expropriation of land. Perhaps the moral is that we cannot and indeed should not, get Indian culture as cheaply or as easily as the early settlers, in a most improper sort of appropriation, got so much of Indian property.

Endnotes

[1] James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth–Century Ethnography, Literature and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1988), p. 212.

[2] Susan Hiller, (ed.). The Myth of Primitivism (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 55.

[3] William Rubin, (ed.). Modern Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 463.

[4] Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects (New York: Columbia U.P., 1983).

[5] It is interesting to compare the use of K rather than c to suggest Africanness in black radical political manifestoes and poems in the 1970s in America. (Though there is also the use of it in Ku Klux Klan..).

[6] Marsden Hartley, Red Man Aesthetics.

[7] Mary Austin, The American Rhythm (1923, enlarged 1930) repr. New York: AMS Press, 1970).

[8] 'The Path on the Rainbow', reprinted in Abraham Chapman, (ed.) Literature of the American Indian: Views and Interpretations (New York: New American Library, 1975) p. 267.

[9] Frances Densmore, Chipewa Music, (Bulletin 49, Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, repr. Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1973), p. 150–1.

[10] Margot Astrov, (ed.). American Indian Prose and Poetry: An Anthology (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1970), p. 79.

[11] Carl Sandburg, 'Aboriginal Poetry', *Poetry*, Vol. 9, January 1917, p.255.

[12] W.B Yeats, quoted in, Mahasweta Sengupta, "Rabindranath Tagore in Two Worlds" in S. Bassnet + A. Lefevere, *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Pinter, 1990) p. 60.

[13] William Brandon, (ed.) *The Magic World: American Indian Songs and Poems* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. xiv.

[14] Hal Foster, *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Wash: Bay Press, 1985), p. 188–915).

[15] For examples, from a wide range, of the continuing debate over Indian translations, see B. Swann and A. Krupat, *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature* (Berkeley: California U.P., 1987) and, more briefly, William Bevis, 'American Indian Verse Translations' in Abraham Chapman, (ed.) *Literature of the American Indian: Views and Interpretations* (New York: New American Library, 1975). For recent examples of creative or what he calls 'total' translation, see Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).