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Summer 1998

Review of *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts* By William M. Clements

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Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts. By William M. Clements. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. Notes, references, index. ix + 252 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Native American Verbal Art should be required reading for all teachers of American literature committed to teaching translations from the Native American oral tradition. William Clements's study stands as a companion to *The Sixth Grandfather* (1984), Raymond DeMallie's account of the textual creation of *Black Elk Speaks*. Using an historical approach, Clements reveals the problems of translating traditional oratory, including the translator's

frequent ignorance of the Native language being translated. (While some translators have worked with a bilingual intermediary, many have simply re-rendered previous translations without reference to the Native language text.)

Clements examines in some depth the practices of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century translators, including Henry Timberlake, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, and Natalie Curtis, highly regarded by their contemporaries but generally discredited today. Respectful of those who have preceded him in the study of Native American verbal arts (a term which seeks to avoid the connotations attached to *literature* in European American discourse), Clements attempts, insofar as he can, to vindicate the literary approaches used by these translators. He suggests, for example, that Timberlake may have chosen heroic couplets to avoid implicating his Cherokee war song in fake archaism and the Ossian controversy, then at its height. Not every translator can be redeemed, however. Clements finds no virtues in Schoolcraft's published translations.

In accord with contemporary theories of ethnopoetics, which seek to restore traditional songs, narratives, and oratory to a performance context, Clements places high value on translations that convey oral performance style and those accompanied by descriptions of the performance context. Indeed, performance grounds Clements's approach to his subject. He is interested both in the translator as auditor (sometimes sole auditor) of a performance event and in the audience for whom the translation is shaped. He notes that even the meticulous process of linguistic transcription central to the work of Frans Boaz can distort the performance aesthetic, resulting in translation inaccuracies through loss of verbal artistry.

The volume concludes with an historic overview—and a pointed critique—of Native American literary anthologies, which almost always decontextualize oral materials, positing a false analogue to Western literary tradition while ignoring indigenous traditions. It is

unfortunate that Clements fails to confront the fundamental controversy regarding Native American translations: whether sacred materials from living cultures should, in fact, be translated and published at all.

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