

American Indian Prose and Poetry

AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY

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CAPRICORN BOOKS

New York

Chapter I: The Power of the Word

THE MAGIC CREATIVENESS OF THE WORD

The singing of songs and the telling of tales, with the American Indian, is but seldom a means of mere spontaneous self-expression. More often than not, the singer aims **with** the chanted word to exert a strong influence and to bring about a change, either in himself or in nature or in his fellow beings. By narrating the story of origin, he endeavors to influence the universe and to strengthen the failing power of the supernatural beings. He relates the myth of creation, **cere-**monially, in order to save the world from death **and** destruction and to keep alive the primeval spirit **of** the sacred beginning. Above all, it seems that the word, both in song and in tale, was meant to maintain and to prolong the individual life in some way or other—that is, to cure, to heal, to ward off evil, and to **frus-**trate death. Healing songs, and songs **intended** to **sup-**port the powers of germination and of growth in all their manifestations, fairly outnumber all other songs **of** the American Indian.

The word, indeed, is **power**. It is **life**, substance, reality. The word lived before earth, sun, or moon came into existence. Whenever the Indian ponders over the mystery of origin, he shows a tendency to ascribe to the word a creative power all its own. The word is conceived of as an independent entity, superior

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even to the gods. **Only** when the word came up mysteriously in the darkness of the night were the gods of the Maya enabled to bring forth the earth and life thereon. And the genesis of the Uitoto opens, **characteristically** enough, in this way: "In the beginning, the word gave origin to the Father." The word is thought to precede the creator, for the **primitive** mind cannot imagine a creation out of nothingness. In the beginning was the thought, the dream, the **word**.

The concept of the word as Creative Potency lives on, even in the simplest song of hunting or of **harvest**, of battle, love, or death, as sung by the contemporary Indian.

It is this conscious certainty of the directing and influencing power of the word that gives a peculiar urging force to the following war song as heard by Robert H. Lowie among the Crow **Indians**:¹

Whenever there is any trouble,
I shall not die but get through.
Though arrows are many, I shall arrive.
My heart is manly.

By chanting these words the singer raises himself to a higher level of achieving power; it is the magic quality of these words that will render him invulnerable.

It is not the herb administered to the sick which is considered the essential part of the cure, rather the words recited over that herb before its use. When a Hupa Indian is sick, the priest recites over him the account of a former cure whose central incident is the travel of some mythical person to the ends of the

¹R. H. Lowie, *Crow Religion*, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, XXV (1922), 410.

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world to find release from his ailment. It is **sufficient**; says Goddard in his fine book on the Hupa, that the priest tell how one went: the spirit of the **suffering** person will follow the words even if he does not comprehend them.

A considerable number of songs of the Indian can be understood only from this firm belief in the word's power to bring about the desired result upon which the singer has fixed his **mind**.²

The word not only engenders courage **and** power of endurance, but it also is the ultimate source of **material** success. "I have always **been** a poor man. I do not know a single song," thus the Navajo informant of W. W. Hill began his account of **agricultural practices**.

It is **impossible** [continues Dr. Hill] to state too strongly the belief as illustrated by that statement. It summed up **in** a few words the whole attitude of the Navaho toward **life** and the possibility of success. With respect to agriculture, it was not the vicissitudes of environment that made for successful crops or failures, but the control of the natural forces through ritual.

And, quite logically, the Eskimo hunters think it a mistake to believe that women are weaker than **men**. For were it not for the incantations sung by the women left behind, the hunter would return without game. Said one hunter to Bogoras: "**In** vain man walks

²Of course, it should be kept in mind that the tune which carries the word is of equal importance and may emanate as much magical power. Poetry, with the American Indian, is not an independent art but exists only in connection with music—that is, as song.

*W. W. Hill, *The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navaho Indians*, Yale University Press, 1938, p. 52.

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around, searching; but those that sit by the lamp are really strong, for they know how to call the game to the shore. . . .”

SONGS OF HEALING

The poetic imagination of primitive man circled, naturally, with greatest persistency around the mystery of life and death. Physical sickness was experienced as partial death. When a medicine man committed himself to a cure, he was conscious of fighting a battle against death, already present in the suffering individual.

His strongest weapon in this fight was the word.

Thus, the chief aim of the *Midé*—the native religion of the **Chippewa**—was to secure health and long life to its adherents, and elaborate initiations and song series were held during spring, and each member was expected to attend at least one of these gatherings for the renewal of his spiritual power.

Each initiate (*Midéwinint*) had his own set of songs, some of which he had composed himself and others which he had purchased for considerable sums of money or for equal values of goods.

The initiates, we are told, have to go through eight degrees, which means through a succession of symbolic deaths and resurrections. The following song is a song a neophyte receives while he is passing through such a painful experience of ceremonial dying: ⁴

⁴ Frances **Densmore**, *Chippewa Music*, I, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 45, p. 73.

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You will recover; you will walk **again**.
It is I who say it; my power is **great**.
Through our white shell
I will enable you to walk again.

And as the initiate revived, the words of this song will forever retain its healing power: it is the healing song *par excellence*. Songs with similar words of gentle coercion and firm confidence were chanted all over the **continent—accompanied** by the compulsive beat of the drum. The word heals and restores!

That the curing song may be considered to exert a twofold function we learn from Leslie Spier. The Maricopa shaman who is about to practice a cure sings his songs, which he has received in dreams, in the first place in order to gain strength himself. The cure itself is secondary and additional. It further seems as though healing power was believed a quality inherent in all song, the inseparable essence of melody and word.

In describing dreams to me [says Dr. **Spier**] the song was always mentioned first, as though that was the most significant element. The curative powers which the dreamer acquired . . . were sometimes mentioned as adjunct to song.

Which only proves again that song, at least with the American Indian, hardly exists as a pure art form: it always serves an **end**.⁵

The **Navajo—shepherds** of the Arizona **deserts—are**

⁵Among the Fox we find the same attitude toward song as a life-preserving means. Said Owl: "Well, now I shall tell you about this which we sing. As we sing the **manitou** hears us. The **manitou** will not fail to hear us. It is just as if we were singing within the manitou's dwellings. . . . We are not singing sportive songs. It is as if we are weeping, asking for life. . . ." **Michelson**, *The Owl Sacred Pack of the Fox Indians*, p. 57.

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beset to a large degree by the fear of the **all-pervading** powers of evil and death. In this the Navajo, together with the neighboring Apaches, distinguish themselves from most of the other tribes of the American Southwest. Yet these Bedouins of North America are remarkable psychiatrists. All of their ceremonies are prophylactic or therapeutic means to free themselves from the nightmare of dread and inward **panic**. They are harassed by innumerable fears. Nevertheless, they are placid and gay and gracefully poised people; for they have instituted a cure for every threatening or real **disturbance** of their **mental equilibrium**—a cure against the poisonous breath of evil thought; a cure against bad dreams; a cure against every kind of physical ailment; and numerous cures against the impurity of death.

But the evils that are feared most of all are the intangible powers that **lurk** in the soul of man himself. It is the unknown error and the undiagnosed dread that are really dangerous. But even for this grave internal ailment the Navajo inaugurated a healing ceremony, the evil-chasing chant. This ritual, with its sand paintings, chants, and magic paraphernalia is supposed to absorb the concealed and hidden evil. And, as evil is due to ignorance, a person can be cured by being told the origin of evil, which is the purpose of the Ceremony of the Enemy Way as recorded by Father Berard **Haile**. And not only will the patient be cured by way of knowledge, he also will have gained **power**; for, through ritual and song, evil has turned into good—a psychiatric **method** of transmutation reminiscent of alchemistic processes, indeed.

Above all, however, it is the spirit of **creation** that

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heals. With the aid of his song, the Navajo medicine man submerges the sick, or frightened person in the beauty and perfection of primeval creation. With compelling repetitions he sings of the earth and the stars and the growing **corn**, as they were in the days of origin. Thus **the** suffering person is placed within the purity of the beginning of all things, when man knew neither sin nor fear and the horror of death. It is of psychological significance that in the Creation Myth, as recorded by Mary C. Wheelwright, fear of death or dying is not mentioned. Rather, the patient (*hatrali*—that is, the man who is "sung over") is made to accept the idea of death, for according to the myth Sun and Moon could not go on living unless every day and every night a person should **die**.⁶

Or, by way of the magic word, the medicine man is relating the sick person to the companion of the never-ailing gods, who are traveling across the **Rainbow** from the Mountain of **Everlastingness** to **the** Mountain of Unending Happiness. He is made to breathe in the purifying air of sacred places where only **gods** are wont to abide. And out of the agony of fear and pain he awakes renewed, suffused with divinity and strengthened by the dream-experienced reality of life eternal.

The long song sequences of the curing ceremonies of the Navajo are sacred, **and** bear the patina of antiquity and the mark of the inward experiences of generations: no word may be altered nor omitted, no gesture of dance and ceremony may be changed.

However, it should be added that the Navajo discriminate between **songs that** must **be** sung precisely,

⁶See also Washington Matthews, *Navajo Legends*, Houghton Mifflin, 1897, pp. 80, 223.

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with no alterations whatsoever, and the sequence of whole ceremonies. No singer, says Clyde Kluckhohn. in his indispensable *Introduction to Navajo Chant Practice*, ever gives two performances of the **same** chant without some variations: "absolutely precise **re-**petition of any ceremonial behavior is dangerous **to** the performer." An excellent observation from a **psy-**chotherapeutic point of view.

INDIVIDUAL SONGS

Still, there exists another group of songs that may well be noted here, songs born out of the moment of lonely suffering, songs composed by individuals in the subconscious endeavor to soothe the anguished heart by transporting the inward pain into the reality of words.

It is only crying about myself
That comes to me in song.

Thus sings an unknown poet high up on the **mist-**enshrouded coast of the Pacific.

Frances **Densmore** tells of an old and blind woman who lived among the Nootka of the Northwest **Coast**. This woman was very poor and homeless and drifted from family to family. She used to **sit** against the **wall** of some house all day, singing softly a song like this:

Sing your song
Looking up at the sky.

And the **people** were always glad to have her near and to give her a meal, for she spread happiness wherever she went.

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The same author collected among **the** Chippewa a wee little song, once composed by a child left alone in the wigwam during a long, long night. Now, the great fear of Chippewa children is the owl. And to drive away the gnawing dread of the owl's hooting, the child channeled his terror into the words of a song that he repeated over and over again. This is the literal translation:

Very much also
I of the owl am afraid,
Sitting alone in the **wigwam**.

The people in near-by tents heard him singing all through the night, and they learned the song and it became quite popular in the village.

Among the Mandan a number **of** songs have been recorded which did not serve any magical purpose, but were merely the expression of individual longing and loneliness. Thus the **work** of the scout was often wearisome, and during the long hours of vigil, **far** away from camp, homesickness sometimes threatened to overcome him. Then the few words of a song, composed there and then, might endow the scenes of camp life with a sense of greater reality and so create the illusion of the longed-for social contact. Sings **a** scout:

A certain maiden
To the garden goes,
Lonely
She walks.

At the same time a Mandan woman, **whose task** it is to watch over the maturing crops, might also be **over-**whelmed with loneliness and sorrow **and** sing a song like this:

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The man who was my lover
He is dead.
I am lonely.
If I could go to him
I would go—
No matter how far away.

Though no magical healing power is believed to be inherent in this type of song, these **words** will have exerted a healing effect nonetheless, for the "word" as such heals and restores.

ESKIMO SONGS

Sometimes the song is not thought of as the starting point of the cure itself, but as a means to induce utter concentration, indispensable for the sincere medicine man in order that he may find out the source of some mental disturbance or physical sickness of some patient.

Knud Rasmussen tells of such an experience he had among the Iglulik Eskimo. He was enjoying the hospitality of Padloq, the *angakoq*, and his friendly wife Taqonak. He **had** arrived at a time when the aging couple were greatly troubled about the failing health of the child they had adopted. Rasmussen relates:

One evening Padloq . . . had been particularly occupied in studying the fate of the child. We were lying on the bench, enjoying our evening rest, but Padloq stood upright, with closed eyes, over by the window of the hut. He stood like that for hours, chanting a magic song with many incomprehensible words. But the constant repetition, and the timid earnestness of his utterance made the song as it were an expression of the frailty of human life and man's **helplessness** in the face of its mystery. Then, suddenly, after

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hours of this searching in the depths of the **spirit**, **he seemed** to have found what he sought; for he clapped his **hands** together and blew upon them, washing them as **it were**; in fresh human breath, and cried out: "Here it is! **Here** it is."

We gave the customary response: "Thanks, **thanks**. You have it."

Padloq now came over to us and explained that **Qahitsap** had been out in the previous summer in a **boat**; **the** sail of which had belonged to a man now dead. A breeze from the land of the dead had touched the child, and now came the sickness. . . .

While the Navajo lead their suffering fellow men back to the days of creation in order to cure them, the Eskimo deem it best to sing healing songs that convey joy. For the helping spirits, they **say**, avoid contact **with** human beings who dwell too long on **sorrow**, and evil prevails where laughter is **unknown**,

Thus Rasmussen tells further of a women shaman who once received, quite unexpectedly, a **song from** her helping spirit. These are the words **of** the song:

The great sea
Has sent me adrift,
It moves me as the weed in a great river,
Earth and the great weather move me,
Have carried me away,
And move my inward parts with **joy**. .

These two verses, says Rasmussen, 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 who felt themselves accused and admitted their **offenses** obtained release from these by lifting **their** arms and making movements as if to fling

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away **all** evil, all that was false and wicked was thrown away. . . .”

The entrancing repetitions of a song of joy led voluntarily to a catharsis and purification of the soul.

Indeed, fixed anger and stable resentment that find no egress whatsoever are capable of eating up a man's soul, step by step, very slowly and painfully.

The same Iglulik Eskimo devised a most congenial method of giving poisonous grudges a **vent--the** contest or juridical drum song.

In these duels of abuse the singer endeavors to present his enemy in a ridiculous light, making him the laughing stock of the assembled community. No mercy must be shown. Sneers hiss like sharp arrows to and **fro**. Weaknesses and faults and lies are uncovered with wit and edged laughter. But behind all such **castiga-**tion, says Knud **Rasmussen**, there must be a touch of humor, for mere abuse in itself is barren and cannot bring about any reconciliation. It is legitimate to be nasty, but one must be amusing at the same time in order to make the audience laugh. For laughter cures.

Thalbitzer reports a similar custom as practiced among the Greenland Eskimo: the opponents give vent to their anger in a most poetical form, drumming and singing against each other until all anger is evaporated and peace has been established among the enemies.

Thus the contest songs of the Eskimo (and one finds the same custom among African tribes) may well be **classified** under the Songs of Healing, for they heal a soul stifled with hidden anger and poisoned by baneful repression. By giving an outlet to **pent-up aggres-**

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sion and animosity, the **twisted** mind is straightened out, cleansed and renewed.

As a means of keeping up the **sound equilibrium** both of individual and of group, the art of poetry stands foremost among the natives of the Americas. Nothing worse, in fact, can be laid **upon** the heart of the Eskimo than the consciousness of being denied the gift of singing. Among the Amassalik Eskimo a tradition is handed down of a woman who went through **life** without ever having been able to sing a song. A most lamentable **fate!** After her death, an *angaqok* had to undertake one of his professional journeys to the spirit land. Having arrived there, he met the woman—**just** happily singing a song. Down he rushed to tell the mourning husband about the fortunate transformation. He indeed could receive no better news; with beaming eyes, he sprang up and whirled around jubilation. Death, then, was not so bad after all when it could transform a most unfortunate person into a perfectly happy **one!**

SONGS OF GROWTH **AND** GERMINATION

In a way, the songs of growth and germination may **also** be grouped in the class of healing songs. It is with **these** songs of growing and maturing that the Indian reveals most conspicuously his innermost **being—his** Integral **relationship** to the forces of nature and the universe.

The Indian of the Southwest, for instance, after having planted the seeds of his corn, sings softly at **eventide** the ancient tunes, while he is pounding the

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earth with his feet and the drum is throbbing in **the** rhythm of his **blood** and of all things **growing**—perhaps a song as recorded by Ruth Underhill among the Papago Indians of Arizona:

Blue evening **falls**,
Blue evening falls,
Near by, in every direction.
It sets the corn tassels **trembling**.

The Indian becomes part of the creative divinity that lives in all things germinating and unfolding. Streams of **renewal**—**welling** up from the powers below, pouring down from the powers **above**—are flooding his being and are doubled in strength within himself, and he returns it in chanted word and gesture of solemn **summoning**. The Indian thus experiences himself as an active part of the creative processes of the earth, which are forever progressing and retarding, swelling and subsiding, in the gigantic rhythm of the cosmos.

While the Indian, during the times of general maturing, abandons his personality and flings all of his spiritual power into the caldron of renewal, he himself **will** be renewed. **While** he joins the supernatural forces in the annually recurring process of creation, he himself **will** be recreated and made over from the bottom of his being. The words that are believed to promote fertility, fructify not **only** the soil that has received the seed of the corn, but also the soil of his **soul**.

To have once witnessed a **religious ceremony**—for instance, the Corn Dance as performed so superbly by the Santo Domingo Indians of New **Mexico**—**helps** one to understand better than anything else the Indians relation to the word as the powerful agency **that**

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brings about what he desires **most—that** is, germination, growth, fertility.

Though with **some** Indian tribes, as we have seen, song was not quite unknown as a means of spontaneous self-expression and was not infrequently composed on the spur of the moment, on the whole the song of the American Indian can fully be understood only in its functional setting, as a product and tool of the group and deep-rooted tradition. Only if it is heard as part of a ceremony, be it one of purification, curing, or initiation, does one become quite aware of the intensely pragmatic function of all song. And even though one may not understand the language proper, it is possible to feel the meaning of a song if heard as part of its spiritual matrix, against the background of native culture and native landscape.

It was a hot day in August. The highway leading to the pueblo was an avenue flanked by tall sunflowers —**and** beyond this brilliant hedge of ever so many sun-disks the desert stretched, dotted with sagebrush, to the purple ranges of distant mountains, slope after slope, until they were lost in the haze of the heat-misted **skies**.

When we arrived, the Saint had already been carried to his bower of evergreen branches, and women had placed their offerings of bread and fruit before the image. A group of *Koshairi* were just emerging from the Turquoise Kiva, and the dancers were moving from the cottonwoods, near the church, toward the sun-parched plaza.

A drum was **sounding—as** it seemed from **nowhere**: Rattles were rapping, feet were pounding, voices united

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in a chant. The second part of the dance had **begun**. One's own soul seemed to respond almost immediately to the sudden up-surge of powers which live in everyone, powers that are only the condensed expression of man's yearning for growth and the gentle unfolding of that which is hidden and yet brimful with life. One's very being seemed to be woven instantly into the rich pattern of drumbeat, song, rattle chime, thudding of moccasined feet—and the indescribably delicate gestures of mute prayer.

Behind the men, the women moved. **The** men—urgent, powerful, insistent. **The women—rapt**, self-abandoned, and yet exquisitely self-restrained. On their heads the women wore the green *tablitas*, carved prayers for clouds and rain. The black ceremonial garment contrasted strikingly with the brown skin of bare shoulders and bare arms; into their red sashes twigs of spruce were tucked, and they held a bunch of spruce in each hand, moving them up and down in the rhythm of the dance. The sky was blue and the sand of the plaza red hot. The women danced bare-foot. They followed the men, who, like the women, had their hair flowing. But they had fastened in it feathers of the parrot, for men, it is said, are closer to the powers above. The men did not dance bare-foot. Their feet were securely moccasined, their ankles edged with fur of the **skunk**; and while they pranced, the fox pelt, fastened at the back of their white Hopi kilt, dangled and whipped and wagged, touching at times the women. With the right hand they shook the blackened gourd rattle, and in the **left** they carried the symbol of life, the spruce. Spruce **everywhere—it** sprouted out of their belts, their bracelets, out of the

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vividly colored worsted garters and the **strings** of **hoof-**rattles and bells beneath their knees. On the bare breast some wore an abalone shell, some a few **strings** of turquoise, and others **only** a single **arrowpoint**. .

And in and out, through the varying formations of the dance, the *Koshairi* moved, the spirits of the dead, controlling and blessing the ways of the living, expressing to perfection the essence of all Pueblo religion: the creative coalition between the intangible realities of what we call the Other World and the palpable phenomena of the Here and Now. With the **Puebloños** there is no gap between these two systems of experience. The dead dance with the living. It seems to be difficult, however, to make sure whether the *Koshairi* are believed really to represent the spirits of the dead or whether they are only related to them in some mysterious way, and therefore merely assist the *shiwanni*—that is, the **cloud-beings—in** their attempts at fertilizing the earth. However, their make-up indicated clearly their close association with death. Their bodies were painted a grayish white, the color of decay and decomposition. Black stripes here and there across the chest and around the eyes intensified the impression that we were watching beings which had **just** emerged from the underworld. Their hair, **plastered** with clay, was done up in two horns of **cornhusk**, which also stand for death.

I did not notice any **clowning**.⁷ Serenely they danced

⁷The spirits of the dead, while they join the living during certain ceremonies in the pueblos, have to fulfill various functions. They are supposed to promote not only general fertility and to bless the maturing crops, but also to punish certain individuals by ridiculing them. "Clownish" actions, seemingly **alrus-**ing, have quite frequently an "educational" purpose.

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their **individual** patterns, individual **yet** in perfect rhythm with the group of the living. Exquisite were their gentle gestures of blessing, graceful their pantomimes of coercive summoning.

And ever in response to drumbeat **and** song the intensity of the dance was swelling with soft insistence and subsiding again like the tides of the sea.

We had climbed meantime to the roof of a two-**storied** house where we could look down upon **the** long lines of the dancers as well as upon the chorus **of** old men. This change of position threw into high **re-** relief the fact that the directing power of the ceremony was actually radiated from this group of singing **men:** it was the chanted word that ensouled the dance and integrated its various patterns, both **the** unfettered moves of the "dead" and the rigidly prescribed steps of the "living," into the perfection of a highly elaborated work of art.

There was no difficulty in understanding the **mean-** **ing:of** the song as sung by these old men. Out of the depths of their souls they called for growth and abundance. And their song was a prayer, a danced prayer, as it were; for while they sang they performed a sort of posture dance. Like a flower that unfolds and closes its petals, they raised their arms and turned their faces upward imploringly, only to withdraw again for short intervals into the sheltering circle of their ceremonial isolation, to gather new spiritual strength, it seemed. The strength that emanated from the singing men **had** an almost material quality. They radiated this power to the dancers, who translated it into step and gesture; thus they conveyed it more effectively to the outside

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powers which live **under the** skies and in the **darkness** of the **earth**.

Here again the twofold function of all song **became** most conspicuous. **It** was obvious that the men, **in** singing the song, first gained power for **themselves**. **Only** then did it serve to enhance the power of all those phenomena in the outside world whose purpose it is to induce germination **and** to hasten **growth**.

Still another example shows the creative potency which the Indian believes to live in the word.

The more war-loving Chippewa of the northern woodlands developed during the painful period of transition a strange custom, extremely interesting from a psychotherapeutical point of **view**.⁸

It was the practice among the **Chippewa—as** also among most of the Plains **tribes—for** the youth **who** stood at the threshold of manhood to go out into **solitude**, fasting four days in silence **and** reverence, in preparation for a vision that would determine his future life. In this vision he would receive a song that **he** would sing only when he was about to enter the **most** decisive moment of his life: his first encounter with a foe. The arrival of the white man and the enforced and too monotonously peaceful life on a reservation made going on the warpath, by and by, a custom of the past. Thus, the song formerly received in a **dream** vision remained unsung.

But this song meant a reservoir of power, of unused magic and strength. And unused **energy—every** psychiatrist knows **it—is** a constant threat to the mental

⁸See Frances **Densmore**, *Chippewa Music*, II. **Bureau** of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 53 (1912), pp. 247-50.

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equilibrium of a person who carries with **him**, as in the case of the **Chippewa—the** secretly working and ever-urging force of an unfulfilled dream. The Chippewa, in order to avert the threat of being slowly destroyed by his own "power," erects a pole. On top of it he fastens a rag on which he has painted the symbols of his **song—the** sun, the moon, a star, or a deer. And everybody will know that in the hut in **front** of which stands **such** a pole lives a man who never sang his song, but who has the magic power to heal and to fight the fiercest of all enemies, death. He has transferred the energy which cannot find an outlet in the accustomed way into another field of activity.

In parenthesis it may be added that the problem which these "primitives" were facing and solving according to their own needs and their own standards is not so very different from the psychological issue of our time and our own culture. Our crumbling ideals and values, our wobbling beliefs and anemic convictions seem to have got stuck in a "reservation" of utter dullness, and our longings and hopes lead a pitiful existence of spiritual starvation. We are beset with a perpetually gnawing consciousness of **unfulfillment**, even though it may be felt only vaguely by most of us. Unused energy is threatening to eat us up from within, and it is a major task of our own "medicine men of the soul" to give these undirected energies a new and meaningful direction. The passionate culture criticism of an R. M. Holzapfel or an Edward Sapir has not yet **lost** its poignant validity, unfortunately,

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SILENCE, SOLITUDE, AND THE SECRET

I cannot conclude this chapter on the word and its magic healing power, as experienced by the aborigines of America, without mentioning his relation to the creative potency that is inherent in silence, the secret, and solitude.

Wherever the word is revered as a tool around which still vibrates the magic **halo** of primeval creation, there silence, too, is esteemed a reservoir of spiritual strength. Wherever the value of the word deteriorated, turning into a cheap weapon and an easy coin, the intrinsic meaning of silence was also lost. We, indeed, live in a period of an alarming inflation of the word, and nothing is more symptomatic of it than our aversion to silence and quietude that amounts to phobia. A mother of our civilization is deeply worried when her child prefers the ways of solitude and reticent seclusion.

The attitude of the Indian toward the various forms of solitude and silence is altogether different, and the education in quietude and reticence are crucial parts of the child's training.

Says the Lakota Indian Chief, Standing Bear:

Training began with children who were taught to sit still and enjoy it. They were taught to use their organs of smell, to look when there was apparently nothing to see, and to listen intently when all seemingly was quiet. A child that cannot sit still is a half-developed **child**.

And again:

Excessive manners were put down as insincere, and the constant talker was considered rude and thoughtless. Conversation was never begun at once, nor in a hurried **man-**

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ner. No one was quick with a question, no matter how important, and no one was pressed for an answer. A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation. Silence was meaningful with the Dakota. . . . Also in the midst of sorrow, sickness, and death, or misfortune of any kind, and in the presence of the notable and great, silence was the mark of respect. More powerful than words was silence with the Lakota. . . .

The esteem in which silence was held goes hand in hand with a preference for moderation in all ways. To raise the voice was considered a mark of inferiority. Said Maria Chona, a Papago woman, to Ruth Underhill:

My father went on talking to me in a low voice. That is how our people always talk to their children, so low and quiet, the child thinks he is dreaming. But he never forgets.

The merciless abuse of the word on the part of the white man was, it seems, already current at the time when the Jesuit Fathers set out to do missionary work among the red men. For when Paul Le Jeune jotted down the first impressions the Indians had made upon him, he emphasized as the most striking one the fact "that they do not all talk at once, but one after the other, listening patiently." And it was for this very reason that he preferred to share a cabin with the "primitives" rather than with his own countrymen, who could not keep quiet for a minute.

One of the reasons why modern man, generally speaking, avoids the silence of solitude and meditation with such circumspection, is that he fears to face the emptiness of his world. He rather drugs himself with the opiates of noise, speed, and bustle, which render him

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immune against the **giddy** sight of this yawning emptiness which is his heaven and his soul.

But to the Indian there was no such thing **as emptiness** in the world. There was no object around him that was not alive with spirit, and earth and **tree** and stone and the wide scope of the heaven were tenanted with numberless **supernaturals** and the wandering souls of the dead. And it was only in the solitude of remote places and in the sheltering silence of the night that the voices of these spirits might be **heard**.

Ohiyesa lamented deeply the loss of solitude with which the Indian was afflicted with the advance of the white man's noisy civilization. Says he in his fine book, *The Soul of the Indian*:

To the untutored sage the concentration of population was the prolific mother of all evils, moral no less **than** physical. . . . And not **less** dreaded than the pestilence following upon crowded and unsanitary dwellings was the loss of spiritual power inseparable from too close contact with one's fellow men. All who have lived much out of doors know that there is a magnetic and nervous force that accumulates in solitude and that is quickly dissipated by life in a crowd.

Another Plains Indian, also of high standing, Black Elk, suffering immeasurably from having to watch helplessly his people's rapid **decline**, went across the Big Water to the homelands of the white man, in the vain hope of learning ways with which to mend the broken hoop of his nation. He returned, stunned from the din and smoke and narrowness of crowded cities. And he felt, characteristically, like a man who could never dream a dream again.

Owing to his infallible religious **instinct**, the Indian not only made the observation of silence and **long**

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vigils of solitude important parts of his **childrens'** and his own training but, being fully aware of the role which the "secret" plays in the religious development of the individual, he taught his children strict reticence about the most decisive experiences they had during their initiatory rites.

Many of the Western psychiatrists, living, just as their patients do, under the general spell of word inflation, **have** made it a point of their therapy to mark any individual secret as a serious obstacle to the recovery of the lost mental balance. Hence the vogue of endless "confessions" and alarming **self-analyses**.

The Indian, however, discriminated soundly between the soul-endangering influence of the secret an evil deed could exert and the healing power of a religious secret. Only the former had to be confessed in the face of the community, lest the owner of this secret be destroyed by the poison it was capable of spreading; the latter was treasured as the most precious personal possession of the individual. The Omaha youth never tells of the vision he receives during the **rites** of adolescence. And likewise the Yuma Indian says that if a "man tells his dream, it passes **with** the day." And among the Wishram, "no one ever revealed how he came by his spirit; only at the hour of death he disclosed all the mysteries **pertaining** to it." And, continues Dr. Spier, even those Indians who seem thoroughly civilized and sophisticated guard their spirit-power which they received in a dream as a secret and tell it to no one. Clark Wissler also, in his unexcelled classics on the Blackfoot **Indians**, points out repeatedly the importance of the religious secret in the

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individual development of members of this northern Plains tribe.

It seems, indeed, a sign of cultural maturity **rather** than of pubescence when not only the word is considered sacred and is therefore used with reverent economy, but when also the individual "secret" is esteemed sacred as an inalienable personal possession.

SONGS OF VISION AND OF DREAM

Songs might be obtained in two different ways. One method cultivated by the Indians of the plains is the following: a youth or a man who is troubled with grief he no longer can bear without supernatural help goes out into the solitude to seek a vision in which **Wakonda** may reveal himself and bestow upon him a song that will **guide** him throughout his future life. Severe fasting and long vigils are absolutely necessary prerequisites for the acquisition of supernatural help, which is by no means always **granted**.⁹

Another way is practiced by various tribes of southern California and the southwestern deserts, the Yuma and Mohave especially. The power of the song comes to them unsought in the dream of the night, though there are exceptions where the song-bestowing dream is artificially produced by means of a drug, **jimsonweed**. But the natives themselves admit that the days of those who try to direct spiritual power upon themselves in this manner are numbered.

These southwestern **desert** tribes are of a curious

⁹Ruth **Benedict**, "The Vision in **Plains** Culture," in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, XXIV.

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interest from a psychological point of view. Though they are neighbors of the Pueblo people, who are given to rigid ritual and ceremony, outward expressions of religious life have little or no appeal to them.

They are in need neither of priesthood nor of altar; symbol, mask, and formalized prayer find no place in their religious practices. For with these tribes, the dream **is** the only source and evidence of supernatural power, and everybody might be a medicine man or priest according to his dreams. Says Leslie Spier, to whom we are indebted for some of the most elucidating accounts and analyses of those tribes who have made the dream the center around which all the activities of their daily routine circle:

At the heart of the Maricopa culture was the dream experience. It was the one thing of which they constantly talked, the significant aspect of their life as they saw it. . . . Dream experience was at the bottom of all success in life, and **as** such their constant preoccupation. Learning was displaced by dreaming. . . . A single statement of Last Star's epitomizes their attitude: "Everyone who is prosperous or successful must have dreamed of something. It is not **because** he is a good worker that he is prosperous, but **because** he dreamt."

Moreover, the individual dream is not only the basis of every success and achievement whatsoever, but also of shamanistic power, of myth and song and supernatural relations. All myths and songs, though in reality handed down by ancient tradition, are dreamed anew by each narrator and singer.

Needless to say, the songs obtained thus in dreams conform to a definite pattern of the tribal culture and only **seldom** deviate considerably from the grooves chiseled out by the dream experiences of generations.

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This fact, however, does not impair a sense of **individual** creativeness so characteristic of these **people**: everybody is sure to shape his life **according to** false dreams in perfect freedom from traditions just **as the** Pueblo potter is convinced that the designs she **has** dreamed about are new creations of her mind **and** not merely repetitions of ancient patterns. In any case, a dream is obliging, and it is a strict requirement **that** a medicine man must live up to **his dream**; else his power will depart, and his life will be shortened.

The Jesuit Fathers were keen observers and born anthropologists. It is thus of interest to read Father **Francois** Du Peron's letter on the Hurons in **reference** to the paramount role the dream played **in** the life of these northern tribes. Says he:

All their actions are dictated to them directly by the devil, who speaks to them now in the form of a crow or **some** similar bird, now in **the** form of a flame or a ghost, and all this in dreams, to which they show great deference. They consider the dream as the master of their lives, it is the God **of the country**. **It** is this which dictates to them their feasts, their hunting, their fishing, their war, their trade with the French, their remedies, their dances, their games, their songs.

The words of these dream songs are usually obscure, as it is their purpose to conceal the true meaning **of** the dream to the outsider. But to the owner every word **is** fraught with spiritual potency and significance. These words are his fetish, his shield, and his never-failing source of renewal. Above all, his song is **instru-**mental in re-establishing in the hour of **need** the **condition** under which it came to **him—a** condition of direct communication with deity.

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The Plains Indian not only tries to prepare **himself** for a vision by seeking the solitude of nature, undisturbed by man, and by the endurance of hunger and sorrowful vigils during long nights of loneliness, but he also aims to make his subconscious susceptible to the helping influences of the **supernaturals** by the steady contemplation of certain aspects of nature, until he **gradually** loses the sense of his own personality and identifies himself with the forms of his environment. In his growing trance he becomes so very much part of the tree, the storm, the thunder, the animal which he contemplates, that when finally the song comes to him it is the song of the thunder or of the tree that he is learning and making his own.

We choose two examples from Frances Densmore's work on the Chippewa. The words of the first song **are:**

The wind only I am afraid of.

And the words of the other:

Sometimes
I go about pitying myself
While I am carried by the wind
Across the sky.

The exact meaning of these songs could not be understood if it were not for the explanation the interpreter gave Miss Densmore.

The first song was received by a youth during a vision in which he heard the trees singing as though they were alive. They sang that they feared nothing **but** the wind, for only the winds could defeat them. After this vision the young man identified himself with the trees, for he will be afraid of nothing on his warpath;

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of nothing but the howling **winds—and** these will never crush him.

The second song echoed out of the **contemplation** of the storm mystery, out of the sky and the immense loneliness of the prairie. The dreamer becomes the companion of the swirling winds beneath the sky-torn away from his tribesmen, and therefore suffering, but close to the place where the powers **dwell**.

SONG AND DEATH

The Lakota Chief Standing Bear says in his fine *Autobiography*:

Sometimes during the night or stillness of day, a **voice** would be heard singing the brave song. This meant **that** sorrow was **present—either** a brave was going on the **war-**path and expected to die, or else a family was looking for" the death of some member of it. *The brave song was to fortify one to meet any ordeal bravely and to keep up faltering spirits.* I remember, when we children were on **our** way to Carlisle School, thinking that we were on our **way** to meet death at the hands of the white people, the **older** boys sang brave songs, so that we would all meet death **ac-**ording to the code of the **Lakota—fearlessly.**

It is this custom of the brave **song—or** death song—in which the Indian soul expresses itself at its purest; a custom, as it seems, unknown among other people, **so** far as I am aware; with the one exception of the Japanese, perhaps.

Among scholars little attention has been paid as yet to this noble custom we find scattered here **and** there among various tribes of the American **Indian. Some** authorities seem to doubt altogether whether there

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existed a song type that could be called a true death song. But there is hardly any autobiography **written** by **an** Indian that does not at least mention its existence. The Jesuit Fathers, brave and indomitable explorers of the Indian mind, likewise mention frequently the death song as practiced among the tribes of the Iroquois, the Ottawa, and the Huron.

Due to the lack of any thorough investigation into this matter, there is no way of saying whether the custom of singing a death song in the moment of utmost danger or in the very hour of dissolution was restricted to certain areas or distributed all over the continent. This much is **sure—the** Indians of the Plains **as** well as those of the northwest coast and the southwestern deserts were well familiar with it.

Material shows that there existed two different **pat-**terns of the death song. **The** one resembles essentially the dream song, for it is received during a vision or a dream, but it is to be sung only in an hour of utter desolation, or when death stands face to face with the individual. The second type, however, is composed in the very hour of death and chanted with the last breath of the dying man.

As an example of the former class, a song heard by Dr. Lowie among the Crow Indians may follow:

Eternal are the heavens and the earth;
Old people are poorly off.
Do not be afraid.

A few casual words, it may seem. Yet they comprise the essence of a world view, grim but serene: absence of a consoling belief in the continuance of man's soul after death, yet calm acceptance of the inevitable; and

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the assurance **that** it is better to die young amid the din of the battle, for it is a pitiful thing to be old **and** decrepit.

The songs of the second order reflect, at times most vividly, the stress of the hour, great suffering and great self-control.

It is again to Frances **Densmore** that we turn for a suitable example from her vast collection of Indian songs and lore, unfortunately somewhat difficult of access for the ordinary reader.

She tells the story of **Nomebinés**, a leading **warrior** of the Chippewa, who was badly wounded during a fight with the Sioux. At his own request his comrades, who were about to retreat, laid him near the sheltering bushes to die. With his last strength he **sang** his death song he had composed at this time:

The odor of death,
I discern the odor of death
In front of my body.

And, looking into the faces of his friends, he added: **“When** you reach home sing this song for the women to dance by and tell them how I died. . . .”

There is something of Greek grandeur and Greek simplicity about the dying of this wounded Indian, high up in the northern woods **of** America. His words of departure seem **like** a faint echo of those words **engraved** upon the tombstone of **the** warriors fallen at Thermopylae ages ago.

And here is the last song of a man who was about **to** be hanged, also composed on the spur of the **moment**:

They will take me home,
The spirits.

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And the death song of a warrior, left behind on the deserted **battlefield** and assisted only by his friend:

From the middle
Of the great water
I am called by the spirits,

Light as the last breath of the dying, these **words** flutter out and seem to mingle with the soft **fumes** and mists that rise from the river in the morning. It is as though the song, with the lightness of a bird's feather, will carry the departing soul up to where **the** stars are glittering and yonder where the rainbow touches the dome of the **sky**.

In the mind of the Indian, song is associated **with** death in many ways.

All over the world we meet with the belief that whatever is valued most highly among a people is connected in some way or other with the dead. Thus the Pueblo Indians assume that song, way back in times primeval, ascended from the realm of the dead and to this day has its roots down in the nourishing soil of Shipap.

The snake in North American mythology is usually associated not only **with** sky and water, rainbow, stars, and lightning, but **also** with the powers of the underworld, with night, destruction, and renewal. The serpent is conceived as a power that rules life as well as **death**.

The origin myth of the southern **Diegueño**, for instance, tells how song came into **being**.¹⁰ After

¹⁰Leslie Spier, *Southern Diegueno Customs*, University of California Publications in **American** Archaeology and **Ethnology**, Berkeley, 1923, pp. 328 *et seq.*

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Tcikumat, the creator, had died, Wild Gat took charge of the cremation ceremonies. He ordered an enclosure to be built of wood, then he sent for Mattiawit, the mythical snake. He came. And he coiled his length around the pyre upon which the remains of the god were to be burned. Then fire was set to the structure. The serpent, amid the leaping flames, burst asunder—'part flew back to the place he had come from, the rest burst into fragments. Each piece that flew off to the people was a song. Each gens received a song. . . ."

The serpent had come from the underworld, the realm of death, and, dying, he created song for man.

In the life of the Eskimo, song, as we have seen, played a paramount role. According to Knud Rasmussen, not only the name of the drum with which they accompany the song, *quilaut*, related to *quilusk*, which means "the art of getting in touch with the spirits," but song itself is firmly believed to have come from the souls in the land of the dead.¹¹

Among the Omahas of the Plains there exists an interesting funeral custom. When a woman or a man greatly loved and respected dies, the young men of the camp meet where the dead lies. Each of the youths makes two incisions in his upper left arm, and under the loop of the flesh thrusts a small willow twig. With the blood dripping on the leaves of the sprays, the men move in single file, facing the tent of the departed.

The contrast between the bleeding singers [says Alice Fletcher, the authority on the Omaha Indians] and the blithe major cadences of the song, suggestive of birds, sun-

¹¹ Knud Rasmussen, *The Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimo*, Copenhagen, 1929, pp. 228-9.

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shine, and the delights of the upper air, throws light on the Omaha belief relative to death and to song. Music, it was explained, can reach the unseen world and carry thither man's thought and aspirations. The song is of the spirit of the dead; it is to cheer him as he goes from his dear ones left behind on **earth**; so, as he hears the voices of his friends, their glad tones help him to go forward on his inevitable journey.

Among the Winnebago of the Great Lakes district, the **Picuris** Indians of the Southwest, and the Tlingit of the northwest coast, it was the custom to sing songs to bridge for the departed the long and fearful distance that stretches between the land of the living and the land of the dead.

Chapter II: The Influence of Christianity Upon the Aboriginal Cultures of America

In this collection of indigenous prose and poetry there is hardly a passage or a verse which is not faintly touched by the white man's influence, if only by passing through the medium of a foreign language. Even those examples chosen from biographies written and translated by natives themselves can only be understood against the background of transition and as the results of the tragic clash of two cultures which could, as yet, neither be fused nor welded into a new creative whole.

Many of the items of this anthology, then, represent vividly a state of transition and assimilation, or are the expression of dogged defense and passionate rejection, as the case may be. This, in my opinion, does not affect the value of the material. On the contrary, from a psychological point of view, its significance cannot well be underrated. The individual who, in the hour of smarting change and in the face of foreign ideas and bewildering new ways of life, gives vent to his sentiments and thoughts will perhaps allow a deeper insight into the hidden recesses of his soul than he does in tale and speech and song produced in times of sheltered and undisturbed tradition.

Besides, Ohiyesa's pessimism as to the dubious value of the hitherto garnered myths and songs is valid only as far as the Plains Indians are concerned, and even