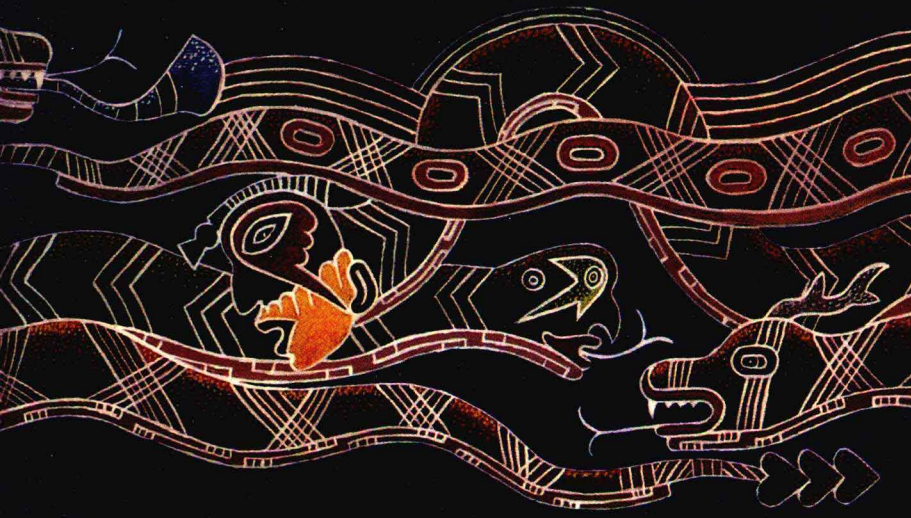
"This valuable collection gathers tribal voice and thought into a surpassing whole that offers to the reader the pleasures of subtle poetry, the intensity of living struggles, the humor of myth, and the depth of consideration for all of life that characterizes the most moving of Native American philosophies." —*Louise Erdrich*

THE WINGED SERPENT



AMERICAN INDIAN PROSE AND POETRY

Edited by Margot Astrov

With a Foreword by Paul Zolbrod

THE WINGED SERPENT

AMERICAN INDIAN PROSE AND POETRY

Edited by Margot Astrov

With a Foreword by Paul Zolbrod

Beacon Press
Boston

Beacon Press
25 Beacon Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02108-2892
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books
are published under the auspices of
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

First digital-print edition 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The winged serpent : American Indian prose and poetry / edited by Margot Astrov ; with a foreword by Paul Zolbrod.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8070-8105-1
1. Folk literature, Indian—North America—Translations into English. 2. Folk literature, Indian—Translations into English. I. Astrov, Margot.
E98.F58W56 1992
398.2'0497—dc20 92-13743

FOREWORD

1.

I discovered *The Winged Serpent* in the early 1960s while first looking for written transcriptions of oral poetry. In the emerging cultural climate I had begun to question the vaunted manuscript tradition of Western Europe as the sole wellspring of literature and to wonder if print was indeed the only poetic medium. Jack Kerouac and the "Beats" were being read at the time, in anticipation of the cultural revolution of the later sixties and early seventies; the civil rights movement had given new momentum to oratory and song; Alan Lomax was elevating folk music to a higher level of respectability, buttressed by performers like Pete Seeger and Josh White; Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* demonstrated that classics like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* had roots in an enduring oral tradition.

Intrigued by such developments, I spotted Margot Astrov's anthology in a remote Santa Fe bookstore. I was undertaking a search for Navajo and Pueblo storytellers who could help show that poetry was not just something written down in verse and confined to the classroom as an example of high culture, but rather a widely applied art form ultimately fixed in the sound of the human voice. Astrov's volume stood out because it exhibited a clear intimacy with Native American cultures that similar collections lacked.

Once I began my own field research I could admire the way she combined broad-minded enthusiasm with patient fieldwork, extensive scholarship, and close reading to demonstrate that a viable poetic tradition existed in preliterate tribal North America. I found myself benefiting in many ways from the knowledge and insight evident here but missing in other books. I also met other readers who were gradually learning to recognize a Native American literary heritage and who valued this work, which seemed to be circulating quietly as something of an underground classic.

Margot Astrov's anthology of Native American poetic material was first published in 1946 by the John Day Company as *The Winged Serpent*, remaining on their list until 1955 when it went out of print. In 1962, Capricorn Books reissued it with the title *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, perhaps to distinguish it from D. H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*. It went through several printings and again won quiet respect before disappearing once more. This is a work whose significance calls for renewed attention, however. Given the increased understanding of Native American poetry making in particular and what we now fail to realize about poetry in general, perhaps the time has come at last to establish it as an achievement worthy of endurance.

The Winged Serpent is an outstanding survey of hitherto unnoticed poetic traditions tantamount to those of classical Europe. Yet when first published it seems to have aroused indifference or outright hostility outside its narrow circle of committed readers. The deeper, foreign patterns of Native American thought in the anthology went widely unnoticed, either be-

cause critics maintained an overly simplistic view of Native Americans as victimized noble savages or because readers accustomed only to print overlooked the intricacies of orally transmitted songs and narratives.

The few reviews I have located either attacked Astrov's work or oversimplified it. The earliest was a short critique by Mabel Dodge Luhan in *Book Week*, November 10, 1946. There she complains that "the lisping fragments of these translated lines . . . have very little Indian in them." In her hackneyed cry of outrage, though, Luhan fails to acknowledge any of Astrov's vast ethnopoetic knowledge. Underlying her self-righteous objection is the simplistic assumption that a good translation should project a glossy, preconceived vision, as if just one existed for all the tribes. Now that we know more about Native American societies and their poetry making, though, we can appreciate Astrov's early attempt to gather Native American oral material from a recognizably wide array of distinct cultures as a pioneering work of great breadth and profound sensitivity.

As for Margot Astrov herself, born in 1908, she immigrated to New Mexico from Germany in 1940 to escape Hitler's Europe with a husband who soon died, leaving the marriage childless. With her she brought a lifelong interest in Native Americans; she may even have begun compiling this book before coming to the United States. By transferring credits from the University of Berlin, she was able to earn a degree in anthropology from the University of New Mexico in 1944. She then matriculated as a graduate student there but never took an advanced degree, ostensibly

because she was out on the reservation both teaching and gathering material, but just as likely because she was skilled at doing research without formal training.

Besides this book, she published only two items that I know of: "The Word Is Sacred," a general essay on Native American poetry in the September 1946 issue of *Asia and the Americas*, and "The Concept of Motion as the Psychological Leitmotif of Navaho Life and Literature," a scholarly study appearing in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1949), which shows how the poetry of a given language is fed by its own innate grammatical structure. With the encouragement of Mary Cabot Wheelwright, the Boston philanthropist and student of Navajo religion, she also recorded a version of the Navajo *Mountain Chant* ceremony during the fall and winter of 1946. The manuscript resulting from that work exists in the archives of the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe. An attempt to find a publisher never materialized, which is unfortunate, for that outstanding example of text retrieval illustrates an easy familiarity with sources and field techniques missing from other anthologies of traditional Native American literature.

Beyond that, Margot Astrov prepared nothing else for publication and spent the rest of her active life teaching elementary school first in a small community near Window Rock, Arizona, then in an off-reservation Navajo school at Canoncito, New Mexico, and finally at Tesuque Pueblo north of Santa Fe. She maintained a close circle of friends in this important intellectual and artistic New Mexico community—some of whom earned recognition in their own right as experts on Native American art and culture. Those still living

speak warmly of her intellect and scholarship and report that she loved children and was greatly fulfilled in teaching them. Without regard for commercial success or critical acclaim, Astrov took satisfaction in the publication of this book. Modest, retiring, and deeply private in seeking professional fulfillment, she was content to go on teaching and doing research for their own sake. "In her own quiet way, she had a vibrant personality," one of her friends told me with unabashed fondness. "In conversation she could lift you to where you yourself felt as intelligent as she was." Beyond such recognition from close associates, Astrov labored in near obscurity until she suffered a stroke in 1959 and was permanently hospitalized a few years later with an ailment that now sounds like Alzheimer's disease. The last close acquaintance known to have visited her tells of seeing her virtually comatose, unable to recognize anyone or to speak. She finished her life alone and destitute at a public hospital in Las Vegas, New Mexico, where according to officials she died in 1980. Behind her she left only her written work and the fond, devoted memories of a handful of people who enjoy talking about her as much for her personal qualities as for her professional achievements.

2.

Like its editor, then, *The Winged Serpent* deserves ongoing recognition. Although broadly eclectic anthologies can indeed attempt too much with too little understanding, when compiled with Astrov's editorial

skill, cultural awareness, and poetic sensibility they offer a great deal. North America's tribal poetry has always been too varied and profound to allow Astrov's efforts to become eclipsed by newly translated, narrowly focused collections from specific tribes.

At first glance, her collection undertakes the same purpose as other broad-based anthologies of introducing a wide range of material, and it repeats weaknesses that inevitably result. Like them, for example, it submits scores of languages and cultures to misleading generalizations. Arranging material by region is a case in point. Astrov groups the Athabascan Navajos and their closely related Apache neighbors with the Hohokam Papagos and Pimas in section three on the one hand and restricts section four to the various Pueblo tribes on the other. Papago and Pima material might just as readily be matched with those of the more northerly Puebloans, however, since those groups all belong to the broad Uto-Aztecan family of languages and share an interconnected prehistoric past. Meanwhile, the Apaches and the Navajos—relative newcomers from the north who entered the region shortly before the Spanish invaded the Rio Grande valley—exchanged poetic traditions with the Pueblos in more recent times. Such distinctions reflect intertribal complexities only now being understood, which says nothing of what they can add to a full understanding of each tribe's distinct history.

Another example of weakness common to these anthologies is the inclusion of earlier English translations by ethnographers sometimes more eager to translate literally or to assemble raw data than to replicate poetry. Those renditions could suppress curiosity

over how a single prayer extracted from a healing ceremony or a speech translated into English might have originally sounded in Navajo or Nez Percé, or what the impact of such items might have been when performed in their original tribal setting. By being arrayed page after page where they were never intended to be placed, selections easily take on a silent facelessness, so to speak, fully inimical to what poetry really is—that art form whose primary medium is the sound of the human voice recited in speech and song with or without the help of print.

To be sure, among the pioneer researchers who first began gathering material there were some skilled translators, such as the redoubtable Washington Matthews, or Frances LaFlesche and Herbert Spinden, whose written renditions can sometimes project a transcendent poetic authenticity. But that authenticity might very well emerge from a work's inner quality—which often plays out of the deep structure of the language which produced it—rather than from the way an English translation feels at the surface. As do many of her selections, Astrov's two introductory chapters suggest an alertness to such quality. There and in her footnotes she registers the distinctiveness of various speech communities whose verbal and cultural differences generated poetic features quite unlike those common to conventionally written literature, whether or not they always sounded good in English.

That awareness alone distinguishes this anthology. Ever since Columbus, blind generalizing about the so-called Indians has prevailed: they had no history, no institutions, no cultures equal to those of Europe.

With no books, they had poetic traditions least of all. Together with her footnotes, Astrov's opening commentary safeguards against gross oversights and easy generalizations of that sort. The overall effect is an aggregate of wisdom, good sense, and literary awareness that makes for a milestone of lasting literary discovery. In today's media-driven culture, barriers have arisen between the academic sector and the non-academic, which in turn fosters a culture of specialization with its designated experts and authorities. Poetry has all but disappeared in that climate except as special training exchanged in the classroom. There it is mostly consigned to the silence of print, while what is spoken or sung exists elsewhere as popular culture in an increasingly departmentalized, video-centered electronic age. Gradually—almost insidiously—poetry has ceased to circulate as widely as it once did and its role has become obscured. Originally a ubiquitous art existing at all levels of taste as a means of cultural affirmation in the widest sense, it is now often regarded primarily as an arcane form of intensely individualized reflection requiring special training to be understood or appreciated and having no utilitarian function.

Among tribes such as the Teton Sioux or the Tlingit, poetry has always functioned in a deeply traditional way—not as a finely textured outer fabric or rarefied experience or personal expression, but as something that an entire culture shares; not as a small body of curricular material set aside for experts and acolytes, but as the total means by which a widely shared tradition reinvests itself from one generation to the next in the stories it tells, the songs it sings, the

chants and prayers it seeks to perpetuate, and the information and understanding its people must refine and transmit. Poetry has sustained that tradition by preserving and relaying established values and has invigorated it by merging new thinking with old or by drawing borrowed ideas into the culture's inner workings.

Margot Astrov understood all that—more widely perhaps than the fieldworkers Ruth Underhill or Frank Cushing may have when they mastered a single language or participated in the life of a single culture. As linguists do she knew that humankind is the language-using species. As an anthropologist she appreciated the collective dynamics that designated and perpetuated a given culture. And as a critic she also understood that whether in its naturally colloquial idiom or in some more artificially sung or chanted form, language could artistically bond individuals to a group while distinguishing one cultural identity from another.

Look closely at Astrov's introduction to spot how trenchantly she could project that awareness. "It must be kept in mind that language not only influences behavior, but also reflects customary responses and attitudes," she says (p. 6). Such an assertion identifies language's deep human function and helps to explain why human communities need poetry to forge collective awareness, and how it is that each culture employs language in its unique way. To illustrate, Astrov describes how the Kwakiutl use one of two metaphors for marriage. They call it either making "war on the princess" or trying "to get a slave"—thereby revealing their distinctively competitive aggressiveness and

their characteristic way of relating in terms of wealth and possession (p. 7). Likewise she mentions how the Zunis personify the earth as a female and call rain "her living waters" in an environment where ongoing life is so dependent upon rainfall (p. 9).

Specifying relationships between marriage and warfare or ownership, or between the sky-borne inseminating rain and the life-giving earthly female, invokes poetry making at its deepest. How such things are expressed grows out of perceptions that somehow gain recognition and that once recognized are verbalized in a communal effort to grasp knowledge and convey awareness. Furthermore, the discovery of relatively simple likenesses leads to the disclosure of more elaborate ones. This book is full of such illustrations in works such as the Kwakiutl prayer, which sees a dead killer whale in terms of a three-way conflict between a fisherman, his rivals, and "Short-Life-Maker Women" (p. 283), or the Tewa weaving song, which portrays the sky as the semen-bearing father, the earth as the receptive mother, and the landscape as a rich tapestry of living offspring (p. 221).

The selections in *The Winged Serpent* show that Native American poetry does not rely on the sound of language alone but on its union with profound significance. The "Speech to the Dead" (p. 151) projects the Fox conception of eschatology as a state wherein departed souls eventually enhance the living by favoring them from the spirit world. The next selection, "Lamentation" (p. 152), then illustrates how intensely the Fox mourn death. And in her accompanying footnote Astrov observes the sharp contrast between the fervor of Fox grief and their stoic acceptance that once gone

the dead can be persuaded to bless the living, which is a subtle recognition that memories of those who are gone enrich the lives of those who remain. Translation notwithstanding, when read carefully with Astrov's note these two selections demonstrate how speech and revelation merge. Together discovery and expression make for poesis—the application of an art form that depends upon the medium of language whether written or not.

Able to penetrate linguistic surface, Margot Astrov learned something about how Native Americans used poesis that is overlooked if they are seen only as victims or if their works are judged only for quality of translation. A teacher herself, she nonetheless thought of poetry as more than classroom material; and as someone who lived and worked among Native Americans, she could see in their stories and lyrics more than a social cause. Poetry, she realized, goes deeper. When used poetically language is radical in the literal sense that it designates the most deeply rooted human conceptions without which the loveliest or most forceful expression remains hollow.

All of which is to say that the editor of this fine book knew the difference between deep poetry, literally the radical essence of what those who employ it have traditionally understood and managed to say, and mere surface poetry, what language displays without regard for inner substance. When awkwardly phrased, translation can disfigure the former without destroying it. At the same time, poetry deftly translated but transplanted insensitively from culture to culture can wither at the very root, especially when moved from the loam of oral tradition into print. Margot Astrov

may have had to rely on some flawed translations in assembling *The Winged Serpent* but her sensitivity to what the works originally achieved was not compromised.

Native American tribes may differ in their collective visions, just as their verbal depictions of relationships often contrast sharply with European ways of seeing them. Yet whatever the aesthetic cost of wresting the contents of this volume away from their context of actual performance, the pieces combine to display a wide range of valuable perceptions along with deep conceptual concerns. That happens thanks to Astrov's open-minded interest and her breadth of scholarship, to her capacity for observation, and to her deeply ingrained cultural sensitivity. Too much is now known and too much new material now exists to permit the future production of any better single-volume anthology of Native American poetry. Yet recognition of this work is necessary in a pluralistic society like ours struggling to acknowledge its own diversity. Better than any such collection I know, this book celebrates the long-delayed discovery that Native Americans have always been highly poetic.

An Acknowledgment

I acknowledge the following people for their assistance in gathering information about Margot Astrov and *The Winged Serpent*. Thanks first of all to John and Carolyn Adair, who graciously shared their personal recollections with me, as did Priscilla and Robert Bunker, Betty Rosenthal, and Katherine Spencer

Halpern. I also thank Donna Slawsky, librarian at HarperCollins, for helping me trace the publishing history of this book under both its titles; Barbara Rosen, reference librarian at the University of New Mexico, who provided invaluable assistance in my search for primary and secondary published material; and Steve Rodgers, curator at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, for helping me locate valuable archival material.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Now sometimes identified as *ethnopoetics*, the study of Native American poetry and literature no longer yields a bibliographical guide easily. For up-to-date scholarly material among academic journals, consult *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, along with *American Indian Quarterly, American Indian Research Journal, Sun Tracks*, and the excellent *Sun Tracks* series.

Astrov's bibliography remains a superb list of then-existing translations and commentary on Native American storytelling, verse, and song. While much has subsequently been translated, her bibliography remains the most thorough, citing some of the very first intertribal collections as well as excellent translated material from individual tribes.

Most noteworthy among other early anthologies of Native American poetic material are Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907, reprinted by Dover, 1968); George W. Cronyn, *The Path on the Rainbow* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918, republished by Liveright, 1934, and then

by Ballentine, 1962, as *American Indian Poetry: An Anthology of Authentic Songs and Chants*); and A. Grove Day, *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* (New York: Macmillan, 1951, reissued by University of Nebraska Press, 1964).

More recent anthologies—all published around the time Astrov reappeared in the John Day catalog—include Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972, reissued in 1991 by University of New Mexico Press); Frederick W. Turner III, *The Portable North American Indian Reader* (New York: Viking, 1974); Gloria Levitas, Frank R. Vivelo, and Jacqueline Vivelo, *American Indian Poetry: We Wait in the Darkness* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973); Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek, *Literature of the American Indian* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1973); Alan Velie, *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979).

A number of scholarly articles exist that evaluate and/or summarize efforts to translate, compile, and anthologize Native American poetry. Any one of them can help the beginner undertake a detailed study. Some I recommend include Dell Hymes, "Some North Pacific Coast Poems: A Problem in Anthropological Philology," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 67 (1965): 316-41; Dennis Tedlock, "On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative," *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 84 (1971): 114-33; Karl Kroeber, "Deconstructionist Criticism and American Indian Literature," *Boundary* 2, vol. 7, no. 3. (1979): 73-89; LaVonne Brown Ruoff, "American Indian Oral Literatures,"