A Sioux chief in tribal regalia

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A Note on
Schiller's Indian Threnody

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A VERY early European poem by a major writer, based on a Minnesota theme, is Friedrich Schiller's Sioux Indian threnody — "Nadowessiers Totenlied" — written in 1797. Its inspiration came from Jonathan Carver's *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, originally published in London in 1778.

Schiller in early years had read a German translation of Carver, issued in 1780 at Hamburg, and in 1797 he reread the narrative and then wrote his poem, which has been translated into English many times. A full account of the poem's form and origin by Harold Jantz of Johns Hopkins University appeared a few years ago in an essay on "Schiller's Indian Threnody: A Problem in the Aesthetics of the Classical Age," as part of a volume entitled *Schiller 1759/1959: Commemorative American Studies*, edited by John R. Frey (Urbana, 1959).

Carver, in the fifteenth chapter of his *Travels*, describes the manner in which the Sioux paid reverence to their dead. The body of a chief, with painted face, he writes, is placed on a skin or mat "in the middle of the hut, with his weapons by his side." Then his relatives speak to him. They recall his valiant deeds, and they ask why his feet are motionless, his lips silent, his arms useless. His soul "lives in the great country of Spirits," they say. After the farewells, the body, if the time is winter, is placed on a scaffold and kept there until spring, when it is buried.

As one reads Schiller, one can well understand how the poet adapted to his use the ideas he found in Carver, but this is by no means the whole story of the origin of the death lament. The Carver description occurs in the second part of his *Travels*—the part entitled "Of the Origin, Manners, Customs, Religion, and Language of the Indians"—and this, as Mr. Jantz points out, is "largely a compilation." The fact is that the account of the death lament which stirred Schiller had been adapted by Carver from an earlier work of travel, the Baron de Lahontan's *New Voyages to North-America* published in 1703 in French at The Hague and in English in London. A German translation which included the funeral speeches was published in 1709. Mr. Jantz quotes in full Schiller's poem in the original; the French, German, and English versions of the farewell to the chief as given by Lahontan; and the English and German versions of Carver's account. A comparison makes it evident that Carver, though he unquestionably used Lahontan, did not slavishly follow him, and he may have been "acquainted with a later and considerably modified Dakota original." On the other hand Mr. Jantz is properly cautious in speaking of the origins of the Lahontan version. He understands that Lahontan was "at odds with European civilization" and the implication, offered somewhat too gently, is that he was not a "purely objective reporter of North American Indian attitudes and convictions."

Mr. Jantz calls attention to the interesting point that the speechmaking in both Lahontan and Carver is in the second person, "addressed to the departed"; whereas Schiller uses the third person, with the speeches delivered "about the departed." Mr. Jantz has done a genuine service not only by virtue of his highly interesting essay but also by offering a new translation of the "Totenlied." He speaks of "a dozen or so" translations, all of which try to achieve four rhyming end words for each stanza. His own translation rhymes only the second and fourth lines and thus attains a large degree of freedom in rendering the literal meaning of Schiller's lines. The Jantz translation is reprinted on the following page with the permission of the University of Illinois Press:

JONATHAN *Carver*

THE PICTURE opposite is a portrait of Little Crow by Frank B. Mayer, drawn in 1851. The original is in the Newberry Library, Chicago. The illustration on page 200 is from a lithograph appearing in *Das Illustrirte Mississippithal* (Dusseldorf, 1858). Carver's portrait appears as the frontispiece in his *Travels* (London, 1781).

See upon the mat he's sitting,
There he sits aright
With the dignity he once had
When he saw the light.

Yet where is his good fist's power,
Where the breath he drew,
Which but now to the Great Spirit
His pipe's smoke still blew?

Where the eyes whose falcon glances
Reindeer's tread could see
Marked upon the grassy billow,
On the dewy lea?

Where the legs which did more nimbly
Travel through the snow
Than the stag, the twenty-tinëd,
Than the mountain roe?

Where these arms which did the bow bend
Strict and tautly to their will?
See, their life it has departed,
See, they're hanging still.

Well for him, he has gone onward
Where there is no snow,
Where resplendent stand the corn fields
Which unseeded grow,

Where with birds are all the bushes,
Where with fish the lake,
Where with game are all the forests
Gayly filled to take.

With the spirits there he banquets,
Leaves us here forlorn,
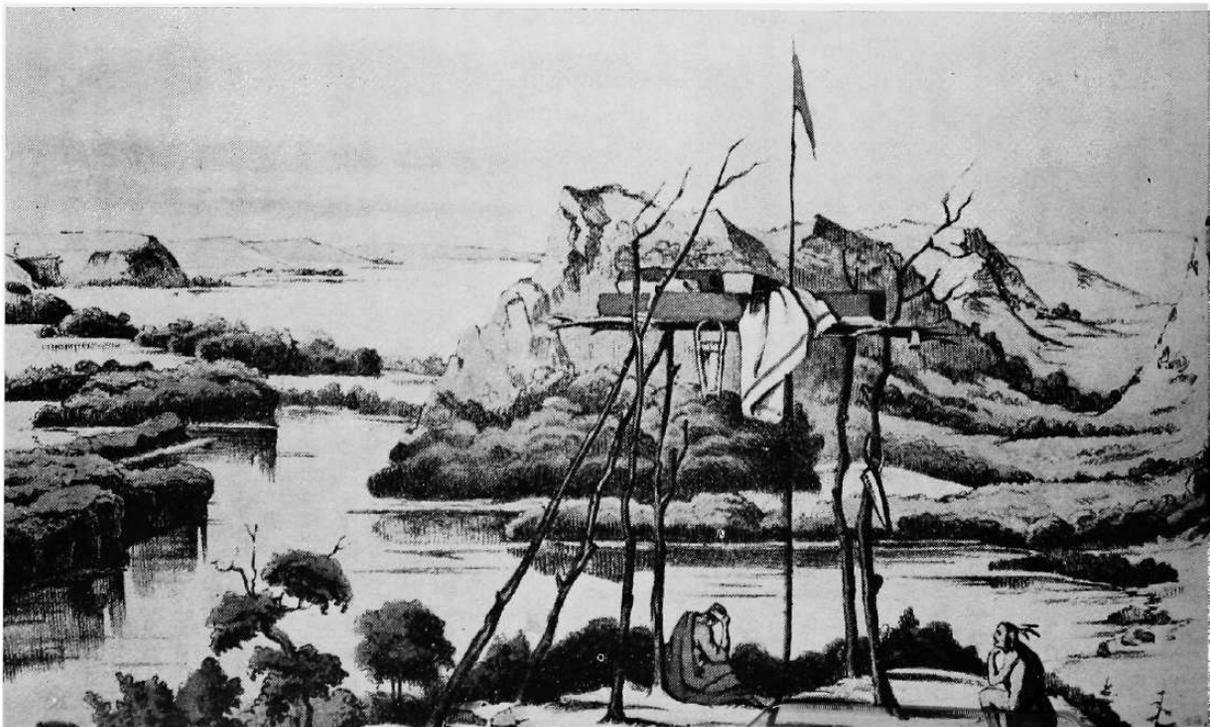That we may his actions honor
And his grave adorn.

Bring the final offerings hither,
Chant the death lament,
All inter with him together
That can give content.

Lay beneath his head the axes
Which he swung so strong,
And the bear's fat haunch beside him,
For the way is long.

And the knife so keenly sharpened,
Which from foeman's crown
Swiftly with three dextrous movements
Skin and tuft cut down.

Colors too to paint his body
Put into his hand,
That he may with visage ruddy
Glow in Spirit Land.

A *Sioux scaffold burial, pictured by the German artist Henry Lewis*

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