INDIAN RHYTHMS

By Llewellyn Jones

MRS. AUSTIN'S book has a threefold interest. Her Indian — rather she prefers, against the protest of Alice Corbin Henderson and others, to say Amerindian — poems are well worth reading for their own sake, as are her own poems included in the book. The Indian poems are, apart from their beauty, a needed document to show us that the Indians whom we have mistreated so shamefully have more to give us than we have allowed ourselves to see. And, lastly, the book will interest the ethnologist and the investigator of the question of rhythm.

As Mrs. Austin puts her very controversial article on Indian rhythms first, we may begin by dealing with it — merely remarking to the reader that it ought not to be read first. The poems are the thing. For the introduction is not only highly technical but rather dubious in its theories. Briefly, Mrs. Austin holds, if compression into a sentence does not mutilate her idea too much, that poetic rhythm is a function — in the mathematical sense — of the landscape. And that our white American bards will find their rhythms subdued to the landscape and removed further and further from their English prototypes. But what does she mean by rhythm? Really she means cadence — and landscape and the conditions of living which any land imposes might well affect cadence. But in criticizing the English rhythm she changes her point of view and regards it as a rhythm dominated by its Greek originals, and speaks of iambic as the "rhythm of privilege". But iambic is not a rhythm at all in her original sense. It is merely a metric scheme to which quite English cadence was adapted.

This and similar confusions seem to vitiate Mrs. Austin's arguments throughout. In one place, for instance, she says:

> The extraordinary, unpremeditated likeness between the works of such writers as Amy Lowell, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters exhibiting a disposition to derive their impulses from the gestures and experiences enforced by the American environment, to our own aboriginals, points away from any such usurpation by the Greek and Hebrew aboriginals. . . .

To which the reply is that these people are totally unlike one another. Lindsay's rhythms are really based on the old English accentual measures, Sandburg has a sense of quantity — a

slow spondaic movement at times — that Lindsay totally lacks, and Masters for the most part writes in blank verse. As for Sherwood Anderson, a few of his poems may suggest the rhythm of Indian corn dances but it is surprising how many of them run in Swinburnian anapæsts quite audible under their slight disguise of printing in prose form.

But questions like these cannot be settled in short essays and shorter reviews. That Mrs. Austin is doing something for which we cannot be sufficiently grateful is quite evident from even a single sample of her work. Here is a song from the Paiute:

SONG FOR THE PASSING OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Strong sun across the sod can make
Such quickening as your countenance!

I am more worth for what your passing wakes,
Great races in my loins, to you that cry.
My blood is redder for your loveliness.

Mrs. Austin has not given us very many poems; other poets, however, have found the same treasure trove, and we may expect, if the work of reinterpretation is well done, the salvaging of a most beautiful and significant body of pure poetry.

The American Rhythm. By Mary Austin. Harcourt, Brace and Co.