

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Mythopoeic Vision in Native American Literature: The Problem of Myth

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/04w32029>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 1(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Allen, Paula Gunn

**Publication Date**

1974

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## THE MYTHOPOEIC VISION IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE: The Problem of Myth

Paula Gunn Allen

It is difficult if not impossible at the present time to speak coherently about myth because the term has become so polluted by misuse. Yet no discussion of Native American literature can proceed without a meaningful concept of what myth is, how it works, and the part that mythopoeic vision plays in both literature and life.

Most commonly, *myth* is used as a synonym for *lie*. Used to suggest something more devious than lie, it implies a malicious intent to defraud one into actions or judgments that are false, unrealistic, irrational, or satanic. Thus, any attitude or idea that does not conform to contemporary "enlightened" definitions of reality are termed myths. The *Random House Dictionary* defines *myth* as follows:

1. a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, esp., a traditional or legendary story that is concerned with deities or demigods and the creation of the world and its inhabitants.
2. stories or matter of this kind . . .
3. any invented story, idea or concept. . . .
4. an imaginary or fictitious thing or person.
5. an unproved collective belief that is accepted uncritically and is used to justify a social institution. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Essentially, all parts of the definition indicate a prevailing belief in the fictitiousness of myth; such words as *alleged*, *determinable*, *fact*, *explanation* all imply falsity or, at least, questionable accuracy.

In a way, contemporary usage reflects an American myth about myth and associated phenomena, and this metamyth is as deceptive as it implies that myth itself is, hiding, as it does, a reality about ourselves and the nature of human experience that we can only ignore at our peril. Part of this metamyth is the belief that there is such a thing as determinable fact, natural (right) explana-

tions, reality that can be determined outside the human agency of discovery, fact-finding, and determination. That such an attitude itself is more in the nature of belief than of reality is attested to by physicists, psychoanalysts, visionary mystics, poets, and artists, and by the human experience of thousands of years and thousands of cultures.

A myth, contrary to the implicit assumption contained in the contemporary view, is not a belief. There is nothing in the term itself or in its linguistic function that can reasonably allow such an interpretation. *Mythos*, the Greek word from which our word comes, means simply *word* or *story*. From this we see that a myth is a particular language-phenomenon that reflects attitudes and beliefs but is, at base, a vehicle, a means of transmitting information of a particular sort. A myth is a particular kind of narrative; in Native American cultures it is related to religious systems; but then, in Native American societies, everything is related to Native American religions.

### Mythic Narrative

The mythic narrative, as an articulation of human thought and experience not expressible in other forms, must be seen as a necessary dimension of human expression and experience. It is in this sense that the truth or realism incorporated into mythic structures can be acknowledged. In this regard, Rollo May defines *myth* "in its historically accurate sense of a psycho-biological pattern which gives meaning and direction to experience."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the mythic dimension of experience—the psycho-spiritual ordering of non-ordinary knowledge—is one experiential area that all men, past, present, and to come, hold in common.

Life, then—at any rate—significant life—was in ancient times the reconstitution of the myth in flesh and blood; it referred to and appealed to the myth; only through it, through reference to the past, could it approve itself as genuine and significant. The myth is the legitimization of life; only through and in it does life find self-awareness, sanction, consecration. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Myth may be seen as a teleological statement, an articulated system of reference that allows us to order and thus comprehend perception and knowledge. Certainly the existence of mythic structures presupposes a rational ordering of the universe as its stance toward experience and toward being. It sig-

nifies the belief of a people in the teleological nature of existence, indicating that powers higher than those of material existence (ordinary reality, in the sense used by Carlos Castaneda) guide and direct the universe and man's participation in it. As such it stands as an expression of the human's need for coherence and unity, for a participative sense of his own presence in the universe.

Yet myth is more than a statement about how the world ought to work; its poetic and mystic dimensions indicate that it embodies a sense of reality that must include all of man's capacities, ideal or actual. These, broadly speaking, are his tendency to feel or emotively relate to experience and his tendency to intellectually organize it. Human beings need to belong to a tradition and to a people, and, equally, we need to know about the world in which we find ourselves. Myth is a kind of story that allows us to project a holistic image of ourselves (both as outer and inner beings) outward, to see what we are, where we belong, and what we may be. It is in this sense that myth is most significant, and it is this creative, ordering capacity of myth that frightens and attracts the rationalistic, other-centered mind, forcing it either into a pejoration of the mythic faculty, the analysis of it, or counter myth-making of its own.

Myth, then, is an expression of the mythopoetic faculty, the tendency to make stories out of the life we live, in imagination. From this faculty come tales and stories when imagination is engaged in by people in ordinary states of consciousness. It is, of course, this relationship between myth and imagination that has caused myth to be regarded as a "wholly fictitious story," as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, or as, in the standard French dictionary of Littré, "that which has no real existence." According to Harry Levin, "Mythopoesis [is] a technical term for imagination at work. Poesis is neither more nor less than making-believe; a poet, etymologically, is a maker; and poetry is, quite literally, make-believe."<sup>1</sup> Make-believe and lie are, to the contemporary mind, virtually synonymous, as are poetry and lie. The implication is that mythopoesis is false on two counts, even though the testimony of psychoanalysts such as Freud, Jung, Adler, May, and Laing, to name a few, shows otherwise. Carl Jung insists that myth is "a reality in its own right, a psychic reality—no less real

than physical reality."<sup>2</sup> The poet who makes us believe is called a prophet, holy man, priest, or savior, depending on our religious bias.

Nevertheless, those who research and record Native American myths and religions are inclined to assume, with Frazer, that "myths are mistaken explanations of phenomena . . . founded on ignorance and misapprehension. They are always false, for, if they were true, they would cease to be myths."<sup>3</sup> (Indeed, judging from the tone ethnographies and collections are written in, one must suppose that "if they were true," the people who are objects of benevolent scrutiny would cease to be quaint, primitive relics of a long-outgrown past.)

This accords with the assumption of many evolutionary theories of culture that poetry is essentially the product of a primitive age, and that it will in due course be expressed by the application of reason to the various fields of human endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

The belief that products of the imaginative consciousness are untrue is, of course, a hang-over from the Enlightenment and, if one considers the modern findings of psychology and physics, it has the aura of superstition about it. In its own way it is itself a myth, based on systems of thought about the nature of reality that are themselves ultimately based on the vision of one or two persons. And not only anthropologists are guilty of this bias; Northrup Frye sagely comments that

literary critics know so little of the province or methods of either poetry or criticism that it is natural for the historian to feel that one pole of metahistory is real and the other imaginary, and that whatever is poetic in a historical work destroys its value as history.<sup>5</sup>

Surely, the idea that millions of people have, for at least thousands of years, led their lives and consecrated their most profound and meaningful actions to "lies," while only the enlightened, "rational," few of the last couple of centuries have been able to consecrate theirs to "the truth," is astounding in its presumption and arrogance. Yet this is exactly the position that the modern American must take regarding the rest of the world, including American Indians. That this position is hardly comfortable is indicated by the confusion that surrounds discussions of myth and mythology. Herbert Weisinger

in "Myth and Ritual Approach to Shakespeare" summarizes the confusion as follows:

As a matter of fact, no myth and ritual pattern as such exists or ever existed in any real sense; it is a modern, scholarly reconstruction of diverse materials drawn from divergent sources. Moreover, and this is even more exasperating, there is no agreement as to the meaning of myth itself. To Whalley, a myth "... is a direct metaphysical statement beyond science. . . . Myth has as its purpose, its source and end, revelation"; to Watts, it is the "*philosophia perennis*"; to Wheelwright, "it is . . . a set of depth meanings of perduring significance within a widely shared perspective"; to Graves, it is "... the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals" or, contrariwise, the antique story of the White Goddess, or even more contrariwise, politic-religious history; and as a final example, myths are "mistaken explanations of phenomena . . ." and this, ironically enough, was Frazer's opinion.<sup>9</sup>

Psychologists seem to come closer to an understanding of the meaning of myth than do mythologists; perhaps the myth and the mind, at least in psychoanalytic attempts to articulate its workings, share many elements in common, particularly the integral parts played by symbol, internal ordering, and posture or belief.<sup>10</sup> Myth may, in fact, be seen as a story of the psyche, true as it corresponds to the psychical experience of people, and false as it deviates from that experience. Henry A. Murray comments that "a myth is a collective dream,"<sup>11</sup> and in a long essay on myth and mythology he makes no more perceptive statement (except that the myth is not the dream but its re-creation).

In the culture and literature of Indian America, the meaning of myth may be discovered, not as speculation about primitive, long-dead ancestral societies, but in terms of what is real, actual, and viable in living cultures within the boundaries of America. Myth abounds in all its degrees; from the most sacred stories to the most trivial, mythic vision informs the prose and poetry of American Indians over the Western Hemisphere.

A Native American myth is a story that relies preeminently on symbol as a vehicle of articulation. It generally relates a series of events and uses a supernatural, heroic figure as the center of focus for both events and symbols incorporated. As a story, it demands the immediate, direct participation of the listener. Detached, analytical, distanced observation of it will render the mythopoeic vision inoperable for the listener. Native

American myths are magical in this way, for magic depends on relationship and participation for its realization. Because of this, these myths cannot be understood more than peripherally by the adding-machine mind; for when removed from their special and necessary context, these stories are no longer myths; they are dead or dying curiosities. Only a believer in mythic magic can relate to a story, can enter into its meaning on its own terms. This is not to say that only a devout Oglala can comprehend the Myth of White Buffalo Cow Woman, or that only a practicing Cheyenne can comprehend the presence of Sweet Medicine; it does mean that only those who accept the nonmaterial or nonordinary reality of things can hope to comprehend either figure. All others are, of necessity, excluded.

We have said that an American Indian myth is a particular kind of story that requires a supernatural or nonordinary kind of figure as its central character. It relies on mystical symbols to convey its significance, and the mystical and teleological nature of myth is embodied in its characteristic devices: the supernatural characters, the nonordinary events, the transcendent powers, and the causative passages (*pour-quoi*) all indicate that something sacred is going on. Properly speaking, Native American myths are profoundly sacred stories that recount a special experience which transcends ordinary consciousness-experiencing. Lesser degrees of this kind of experience are not myths but are legends, tales, poems, or "little stories." There are a few true Indian myths published. Most of what is improperly termed "myth" is in the latter categories. This is because of the profoundly sacred nature of true myth.

On literal levels of analysis, myth tells us what kind of a story it is. It points or focuses our attention on the level of consciousness it relates to us, and relates us to. Having succeeded in this, and having engaged our immediate participation on its own level, the myth proceeds to re-create and renew our ancient relationship to the universe that is beyond the poverty-stricken limits of the everyday.

Mythologists have noticed a connection between ritual and myth. Some believe that ritual is an enactment of a myth, while others feel that myth tells about the ritual in story form. Neither explanation seems satisfactory, and for a very good reason: these speculations

are based on Greek and Roman mythologies, the only kind that the Church did not suppress totally, and on such histories of rituals in Greek and Roman cultures as are extant.

It was precisely because the classics were based upon fictive themes that they survived the mythoclastic rigors of early Christianity. Myths were pagan, and therefore false in the light of true belief—albeit that true belief might today be considered merely another variety of mythopoeic faith. Here is where the game of debunking starts, in the denunciation of myth as falsehood from the vantage-point of a rival myth.

Classical myths could be rescued by allegory, prefiguration, or other methods of reinterpretation; but they could not be accepted literally.<sup>12</sup>

Other material which has come to light in this regard in more recent times has been forced into the preconceived theories held by mythologists prior to Frazer or just following him. But an alternative explanation is possible, based on an examination of Native American practices. This explanation coincides, in some significant ways, with contemporary psychoanalytical observation. Its ultimate proof, of course, lies in the actual practice among mythopoeically viable peoples around the world.

### Visionary Experience

Briefly stated, myth and ceremony (ritual) are based on visionary experience. This simple observation has apparently escaped notice because neither mythologists nor social scientists credit visionary experiences with the validity given them by visionary peoples, including artists and poets. Yet, if one looks carefully at Native American cultures, all will show evidence of direct vision as central to religious practice, ceremony, and literature. In most Indian societies, the vision is actively pursued and brought back to the people as a gift of power and guidance. Thus, Whalley's idea that myth is a "direct metaphysical statement having its purpose, source and end in revelation" approaches most closely the facts of the matter, in Native America at least.

A significant example of the relationship of vision to myth and ceremony is in the story of Sweet Medicine, a central figure in the Cheyenne religion. Called a "culture hero" by anthropologists, and a prophet and savior by the Cheyenne, Sweet Medicine brought the Cheyenne religion, the religious ceremonies, and the social laws, to the Cheyenne people.<sup>13</sup> He received them from

the Sacred Ones who live on the mountain which the Cheyenne call Noahvose (Sacred or Holy Mountain),<sup>14</sup> and which is known to whites as Bear Butte, in the Black Hills country. Here the religion of the Sacred Arrows, the religious and political organization the Cheyenne were to use, the proper marriage ritual, the method for trapping eagles to obtain the emblem-feathers the chiefs wore, and many other things were revealed to him. "There was no end to all the things the people learned from him."<sup>15</sup> Sweet Medicine lived to be a very old man, outlasting four generations of Cheyenne. At his death he told the people how they must live if they wanted to be sure of plenty of game and other kinds of food; he prophesied their future, telling them of the coming of the whites and the horse, the disappearance of the buffalo, and the loss, finally, of the true Cheyenne way. After he died, his body was said to have disappeared. All that remained was the tipi he had died in. The spot was marked with a stone cairn, the historical marker of the Cheyenne.<sup>16</sup>

Sweet Medicine came to the Cheyenne "many centuries ago." A more recent example of the visionary source of a myth is to be found in the life and experience of Black Elk. Ultimately, I suppose, Black Elk will be seen as a prophet and a savior of his people, just as Sweet Medicine is seen by his. Presently he is considered a sage, a prophet and healer, a *wicasa wakan*, sacred or holy man. The fact that he has heirs to his visionary power speaks for the enormity of his gift.

Black Elk was a very young boy when his primary vision came to him. The Oglala, along with many Eastern, Midwestern, Northwestern, Southwestern, and Southern Indians, actively seek visions. The ability to achieve a vision is a mark of maturity; it is a kind of Rite of Passage.<sup>17</sup> Usually one (man or woman) goes after a vision by performing a particular ceremony (actually two separate ceremonies as purification—*Inipi*—precedes the vision quest) called *hanblecheya* or Lamenting for a Vision. But Black Elk was much younger than the age when *hanblecheya* is practiced. He was called, so to speak, by the Powers that are usually sought, and his vision was bestowed on him without his asking. In this respect also his experience parallels that of Sweet Medicine, who was given to visions and miracles before he reached maturity.

In *Black Elk Speaks*,<sup>18</sup> Black Elk tells his vision and the subsequent visions he had during the years of his growing up, and this singularly complete account of a holy man's vision, the ceremonies performed in reenacting the vision, and the powers held by the person who had the vision, indicates the centrality of vision to ceremony, song, and myth. In fact, if Black Elk as narrator were removed from his own account and Black Elk as mythic character left in, and if the point of view of the narrative were shifted from first person, personal, to third person, omniscient, the vision becomes identical in form and symbolic content to those great myths that have come down to us, not from the Oglala alone, but from peoples as diverse as the Tlingit of Alaska, the Hopi of Arizona, the Cherokee of Carolina and Georgia, and the Iroquois of New York and Canada. Certainly, with the exception of the narrator's presence, the story is in the most proper sense a myth. Consisting of a logical progression of symbols, it is in truth a metaphysical statement that is significant in its cosmological implications, in its prophetic content, in its narrative sequence, in its sense of timelessness, in its characters, and, ultimately, in its meaning for people all over this country. Seen that way, it is an example of myth at its most sacred and abstract.

Every element in such a story is meaningful on the deepest levels of human understanding. Thus it is that the true significance of Black Elk's vision is yet to be discovered; the meaning of the vision has not yet been explicated in terms of ordinary human consciousness, and the great sweep of history it encompasses has not yet been lived. Yet much of it has been lived, and those parts are undeniably true. This provides another clue to the true nature of the prophetic aspect of the myth. White researchers have supposed that a myth was a story that was intended to explain and record events after they had happened, so that they would be remembered. Working from this assumption and allied misunderstandings, anthropologists and mythologists have supposed an astounding chain of "facts" about the lives, movements, and ultimate origins of Indian people, and about their cultures, world view, and even their bodies. Yet this primary assumption is false. No Indian who is even peripherally aware of the Indian idea of

things can muster much more than contempt for the ideas advanced by the literary curio-hunters of the white world. Yet few white investigators, aware of and concerned with Indian attitudes, are willing to listen, even provisionally, to the Indian account of these matters. It is assumed that Indians are "making-believe" for religious, political, or existential reasons, or that they are too primitive and uneducated to understand modern reality. It is never assumed that the Indian's version of their own history is put forth because it is a matter of fact.<sup>19</sup> It seems beyond the comprehension of even the best-intentioned sympathizers that what Indians say is not a factor of their overactive subconscious bubbling to the surface in nature-loving, imaginative form,<sup>20</sup> but represents reality as they know it to be after millennia of experience.

Black Elk's vision offers Native Americans a chance to prove that their position is neither romantically primitive nor realistically absurd; for written down white-man style is one of the most complete accounts of a vision ever available and because it is written, the factualness of these contentions can be tested and verified in time. This vision, its elements and their arrangement, can be examined to discover the workings of a metaphysical statement and how myth relates to sacred songs, ceremonies, objects, and ornaments.

The vision begins when Black Elk is guided to the other world by two men who move down through the sky like "arrows slanting down."<sup>21</sup> The long spears they carry emit flashes of "jagged lightning."<sup>22</sup> From the beginning of the narrative we are told the kind of vision this will be: visions that include the powers associated with Thunder and the West indicate a highly sacred or powerful vision and signify revelation, introspection, and deep change.<sup>23</sup> The Thunder and the West are terrifying because they have the power to make live and the power to destroy. These powers are conferred on Black Elk, and are such to terrify any man.

### **Symbolic Theme**

This vision is of or from the West. Its major symbolic theme is Thunder and what is associated with it: horses, lightning, rainbow, water. The other symbols occur in the context of these. Each action or speech occurs, in this

vision, from the West, which is not the usual sequence in Oglala practice.

The directions themselves are the major motif, and generally occupy this position in all Oglala ceremonies. Orienting oneself to the directions is basic to all North American native peoples, and appears to be as important in South America.

The presence of different troops of horses, one troop from each direction, indicates that the vision will be comprehensive. The powers that will derive from it will include war and healing, knowledge and life. The poems and text will, like the actions and sacramental objects, be related to this whole and to these powers. All the powers that man can possess will be represented here, and Black Elk will carry them back to his people, to use in their behalf. The primary thrust of the vision, in keeping with its western point of view, will be that of revelation, self-awareness and deep personal experience, and supernatural truth.

The Grandfathers of Powers of the Six Directions are the agents of this vision and its power. The First Grandfather, the Power of the West, tells Black Elk what will be given him:

"Behold them yonder where the sun goes down, the thunder beings! You shall see, and have from them my power; and they shall take you to the high and lonely center of the earth that you may see; even to the place where the sun continually shines, they shall take you there to understand."

And as he spoke of understanding, I looked up and saw the rainbow leap with flames of many colors over me.

Now there was a wooden cup in his hand and it was full of water and in the water was the sky.

"Take this," he said. "It is the power to make live, and it is yours."

Now he had a bow in his hands. "Take this," he said. "It is the power to destroy, and it is yours."<sup>21</sup>

Each of the Grandfathers plays a role in this vision. The Sixth Grandfather represents Black Elk himself. He shows Black Elk the reality of mankind and its true power by transforming himself into a youth: "and when he had become a boy, I knew that he was myself with all the years that would be mine at last."<sup>22</sup>

He shows himself as Black Elk's body because Black Elk represents all his people; he will be required to take this vision and its powers to his people and use both on their behalf. In no other way can such a vision become actual or positive. Without this sharing of what is conferred on one for the benefit

of many, the vision itself will turn on the visionary, making him ill or even killing him, as later events show.

But while the body or person of Black Elk is like that of the Sixth Grandfather, the spirit of Black Elk (the spirit form in which he will experience the rest of the vision) is that of the Power of the West; for after giving Black Elk the power to make live and the power to destroy, the First Grandfather shows him a remarkable thing: "Then he pointed to himself and said: 'Look close at him who is your spirit now, for you are his body and his name is Eagle Wing Stretches.'"<sup>23</sup>

And in this mystic body, or mythic character, Black Elk goes through the rest of the vision.

### Power of the Universe

The Grandfathers give Black Elk the power to make live, the power to understand and to know, the power to destroy, the power to purify, the power to feed and nurture, and the power to heal. Each of these powers is signified with an emblem or sacramental object, and some are accompanied by a song to be sung when calling on that power.<sup>27</sup> Most important of all, he was given the gift of prophecy, the power of the universe itself.

Now the fifth Grandfather spoke, the oldest of them all, the Spirit of the Sky. "My boy," he said, "I have sent for you and you have come. My power you shall see!" He stretched his arms and turned into a spotted eagle hovering. "Behold," he said, "all the wings of the air shall come to you, and they and the winds and the stars shall be like relatives. You shall go across the earth with my power." Then the eagle soared above my head and fluttered there; and suddenly the sky was full of friendly wings all coming toward me.<sup>28</sup>

In the next sequence, he learns the immediate future of the Oglala Lakotas. In the person of Eagle Wing Stretches, the Grandfather of the West, he journeys over a "distant landscape" rescuing the people from the threatened annihilation of war, disease, and massacre. He restores for them the ancient way, the Path of the Sacred Pipe, the holy tree, the nation's hoop.<sup>29</sup> Then he discovers the farther future of the people, revealed once again symbolically. He is shown the means of saving the people of the earth from the great destructive forces that would overcome them, which is the sacred flower, the "herb of understanding."<sup>30</sup> He learns songs of power and sees the people calling the powers

of the cosmos.<sup>31</sup> That power comes to their aid at the end of the fourth ascent in the guise of "the chief of all the horses, and when he snorted, it was a flash of lightning and his eyes were like the sunset star."<sup>32</sup>

My horses, prancing they are coming;  
My horses, neighing they are coming;  
Prancing, they are coming.  
All over the universe they come.  
They will dance; may you behold them.  
They will dance; may you behold them.  
They will dance; may you behold them.  
They will dance; may you behold them.  
A horse nation, they will dance. May you  
behold them.  
A horse nation, they will dance. May you  
behold them.  
A horse nation, they will dance. May you  
behold them.  
A horse nation, they will dance. May you  
behold them.<sup>33</sup>

The last major sequence consists of a summarization of the vision and a return to more or less normal consciousness. In it Black Elk, as Eagle Wing Stretches, returns to the sacred tipi of the Six Grandfathers where his triumph is acknowledged, the nature of his mythic identity, journey, and powers are explained once more, and he is returned to earth. His journey has lasted twelve days, during which the small boy's body had been lying, comatose, in the tipi of his parents.

The vision which lasted twelve days is divided into six parts, another indication of the depth of its significance, and its inclusiveness. The first part has two aspects, the vision of the Horse Nation and the meeting with the Six Powers of the Universe. The next section, the Prophecy, is divided into prophetic visions of the immediate, the near, and the distant future. The first of these visions has since been lived on earth, as has much of the rest. The last major section, divided into two parts, consists of summary and return.

This final sequence reveals to Black Elk that his body is painted in a special manner, signifying the kind of vision or kind of power he has had:

I had not noticed how I was dressed until now, and I saw that I was painted red all over, and my joints were painted black, with white stripes between the joints. My bay had lightning stripes all over him, and his mane was cloud. And when I breathed, my breath was lightning.<sup>34</sup>

He is assured of his triumph after painful experience; his powers are affirmed and their emblems shown again. He learns the songs,

the way to dress when acting as an agent of the supernatural, the movements and sequences that will ensure his success in these matters, and, most important of all, the meaning of his experience in terms of the people, living and yet unborn.

Had Black Elk had this vision under more normal circumstances, he would have returned from his vision and recounted it to an older holy man, the one who had directed his quest. Then, with the holy man's help, he would have enacted significant portions of that vision in a ceremony for the people; in this way, the power bestowed on him during the vision would have been in turn diffused. In this way, it would have been confirmed, intensified or amplified, and rendered real and functional on material and human levels. But he was very young. It frightened him, made him feel separated from his family and friends, burdened him with a knowledge that he was not old enough to use or understand. Some Indians feel that the disasters that befell Black Elk's people subsequently were a result of his failure to follow the usual pattern; yet it seems that, had this been necessary or wise, the Grandfathers would have either waited several years before calling Black Elk, or would have chosen someone who was of the right age to give that vision to. Eventually Black Elk did what he should have done and the account of the ceremonies held in enacting the vision (actually parts of it) clarify for us the relation between ceremony, myth, and vision.

When Black Elk was sixteen, the time when young Oglalas prepare for their first *hanblecheya*, he began to be haunted by a fear.<sup>35</sup> The thunder, lightning, and clouds called him continuously; the coyotes and birds reminded him that it was his time. He did not know what to do, and because of his growing fear and distraction, became more and more fearful, behaving strangely and worrying those around him. When he was seventeen his parents asked an old medicine man, Black Road, if he could help Black Elk. Black Elk told the old man about his vision, and the old man arranged a ceremony because Black Elk had to do what the bay horse wanted him to do. The old man said he "must do [his] duty and perform the vision for [his] people upon earth."<sup>36</sup>

The Horse Dance that Black Road and another wise man, Bear Sings, designed with Black Elk incorporated all the symbols and



personages in the parts of the vision pertaining to the horses.<sup>37</sup> The songs that Black Elk had heard in the vision were sung, and all the people participated in the ceremony. Black Elk was painted red, the color of the earth and of the East, and the color of what is sacred; and black, the color of the West, of truth, revelation, and destruction. The horses were painted to show their relationship to the lightning, and the riders were dressed to indicate the various symbols that the vision-horses had carried or worn, or that were associated with them. Young women, virgins, enacted the parts, played by their supernatural counterparts, their faces painted scarlet to indicate the connection. Six old men were the Six Grandfathers, and a sacred tipi was erected and painted to conform to the one in Black Elk's vision, with a rainbow over the door.

Thus, in particular details of design and ornamentation, in movements and action, and in characters, the vision was reconstructed as closely as could be done of the non-ordinary in this material plane. The people and Black Elk reenacted the vision, so that its power would be revealed and renewed on earth. In his account of the dance Black Elk comments on the strength (or truth) of this enactment: as they were praying and dancing he once again saw the sacred tipi as in his vision—the rainbow door, the horses, and the Six Grandfathers, sitting inside. He even saw himself upon the bay in front of the tipi. As his vision faded, it began to storm, wind and hail struck.

The people of the village ran to fasten down their tepees, while the black horse riders sang to the drums that rolled like thunder, . . . And as they sang, the hail and rain were falling yonder just a little way from us, and we could see it, but the cloud stood there and flashed and thundered, and only a little sprinkle fell on us.<sup>38</sup>

That Black Elk's ceremony was true and effective can hardly be doubted: after it was over, the people came up to him and told him how they or their relatives were well again after being sick, and they gave him presents.<sup>39</sup> More significant, perhaps, was what they saw in the tipi they had erected:

Then the horses were all rubbed down with sacred sage and led away, and we began going into the tepee to see what might have happened there while we were dancing. The Grandfathers had sprinkled fresh soil on the nation's hoop that they had made in there with the red and black roads across it, and all around this little circle

of the nation's hoop we saw the prints of tiny pony hoofs as though the spirit horses had been dancing while we danced.<sup>40</sup>

And Black Elk himself felt renewed; the fear that had dogged him for two years was gone. He was accepted as a *wicasa wakan* by the other holy men.

This reenactment was normal procedure for a vision of this type. Such a ceremony, or at least use of revealed songs, power objects and animals, or costume and emblematic designs, is incorporated into the visionary's daily life after a successful *hanblecheya*. Sometimes these things are kept privately by the seer, sometimes they are made public, in part at least, as in Black Elk's case, but always the mental or spiritual phenomena are made physical.

For example, the vision of Wovoka, the Paiute holy man and prophet, became the "Ghost Dance." It was danced all over the plains during the most destructive years of the wars. Other visions, received during the dancing by participants, were incorporated into the ceremony as it was practiced in specific locales, but it was through the agency of direct vision that the clothing worn, the songs sung, the dance itself, the rules for the behavior of the dancers, the articles they carried, and the ornamentation they used were determined.<sup>41</sup>

As in the case of Sweet-Medicine and the religion of the Sacred Arrows, all areas of behavior that were touched on in the vision were incorporated into the religious and social behavior of the people the vision was meant to serve. Because of his vision and his enactment of it, Black Elk became a powerful healer. He also gained invulnerability in battle when he imitated the geese, the symbols or emblems of purification and wisdom.<sup>42</sup>

Presumably he would have achieved the status of a great leader, as did Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, had not white wars and governmental systems, rules, and prohibitions intervened. As it is, through the agency of the books he dictated, the personal aid he gave his people, and the heirs he left, he has become a person whose influence extends across the world; his vision was enacted in the Lakota way and recorded in the white man's way, thus reaching far beyond the small hoop of the Lakota across the hoops of many nations, just as the Grandfathers had showed him it would.<sup>43</sup>

Sweet Medicine was an ancient, traditional figure, and the dances, societies, laws, and truths he brought have become the traditional ways of the Cheyenne. Black Elk's vision has had neither time nor appropriate circumstances to become embedded in a people's way, but the processes of the transformation of vision into thought and action are the same. These processes are themselves traditional in Indian America, as is attested to in the ethnographies and collections of such people as Ruth Underhill, Alice Marriott, James Mooney, Natalie Curtis, Jack and Anna Kilpatrick, John Stands-in-Timber, Lame Deer, Paul Radin, Hyemehosts Storm and so many more that simply listing them is impossible. Yet their testimony is clear: the Indian way includes ample room for vision translated into meaningful action and custom and thought, and it is because of the centrality of the vision to the life of the peoples of America that the religious life of the tribes endures, even under the most adverse circumstances. Vision is a way of becoming whole, of affirming one's special place in the universe; and myth, song, and ceremony are ways of affirming the vision's place in the life of all the people. Thus vision renews all: the visionary and his relatives and friends, the generations long dead, and those that are not yet born.

### Vision's Symbols

The vision, however, as vision, can be experienced only by one person directly. Yet it, like all aspects of Indian life, must be shared; thus, myth. Myth is a story of a vision; it is a presentation of that vision told in terms of the vision's symbols, characters, chronology, and import. It is a vehicle of transmission, of sharing, of renewal, and as such plays an integral part in the ongoing psychic life of a people.

In *Love and Will*, Rollo May recounts an experience he had with a Cezanne painting, contending that the painting was "mythic" because it encompassed "near and far, past, present and future, conscious and unconscious in one immediate totality of our relationship to the world."<sup>44</sup> In this way, myth acts as a lens through which we can discover the reality that exists beyond the limits of simple linear perception; it is an Image, a verbal construct, which allows truth to emerge into direct consciousness. In this way,

myth allows us to rediscover ourselves in our most human and ennobling dimensions. Through it we are allowed to see our own transcendent powers triumphant; we know, experientially, our true identity and our human capacity that is beyond behaviorism, history, and the machine.

Myth functions as an affirmation of self that transcends the temporal. It guides our attention toward a view of ourselves, a possibility, that we might not otherwise encounter. It shows us our own ability to accept and allow the eternal to be part of ourselves. It allows us to image a marriage between our conscious and unconscious, fusing the twin dimensions of mind and society into a coherent, meaningful whole. It allows us to adventure in distant, unfamiliar landscapes while remaining close to home. Thus, myth is a device that shows us that it is possible to relate ourselves to the grand and mysterious universe that surrounds and informs our being; it makes us aware of other orders of reality and experience, and, in that awareness, makes the universe our home. It is a magic: it is the area of relationship between all those parts of experience that commonly divide us from ourselves, our universe, and our fellows. In the myth, and especially the mythopoeic vision that gives it birth, past, present, and future are one, and the human counterparts of these, ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants, are also one. Conscious and unconscious are united through the magic of symbolic progression, so that the symbols can convey direct, rationalistic meanings and stir indirect memories and insights that have not been raised to conscious articulation. In mythopoeic vision and its literary counterparts, the near and the far must come together, for in its grasp we stand in a transcendent landscape that incorporates both. Lastly, the mythic heals, it makes us whole. For in relating our separate experiences to one another, in weaving them into coherence and therefore significance, a sense of wholeness arises, a totality which, by virtue of our active participation, constitutes direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are integral parts.

## NOTES

1. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language: Unabridged Edition*, s.v. "myth."
2. Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), p. 107.
3. Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future," in ed. Henry A. Murray, *Myth and Mythmakers*, (New York: George Braziller, 1960), p. 373.
4. Harry Levin, "Some Meanings of Myth," in Murray, *Myth and Mythmakers*, pp. 109-110.
5. Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. Cary F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1933), p. 186.
6. Herbert Weisinger, "Myth and Ritual Approach to Shakespeare," in Murray, *Myth and Mythmakers*, p. 136.
7. Levin, "Some Meanings of Myth," p. 105.
8. Northrup Frye, "New Directions from Old," in Murray, *Myth and Mythmakers*, p. 117.
9. Weisinger, "Myth and Ritual Approach," pp. 135-36.
10. For a discussion of this at length, see Henry A. Murray's article, "The Possible Nature of a 'Mythology' to Come," in his *Myth and Mythmakers*, pp. 300-53, especially p. 311:  

From psychoanalysts—Freud, Rank, Jung and many others—we have learned that numerous themes commonly represented nowadays in the dreams, fantasies, story compositions, play enactments and art forms of children are essentially similar to the themes of widely known primitive myths. . . . From numerous correspondences of this sort we may provisionally assume that dispositions to imagine events conforming to these thematic patterns (mythmaking tendencies) are basic, genetically transmitted potentialities of the human mind, shared by all children from prehistoric times.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
12. Levin, "Some Meanings of Myth," p. 106.
13. John Stands-in-Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 27.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.
17. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1972), and Black Elk and J. Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 44.
18. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).
19. Sitting Bull had a vision before the Battle of the Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn) that foretold Custer's defeat. Yet histories, sometimes mentioning the vision as an example of primitive superstition, I suppose, generally lay the defeat to the "overwhelming" numbers of warriors Custer fought and to tactics of ambush. The facts of the matter are quite different, as an earnest student of military possibilities can discover: as many Indians as some reports estimated could not have watered their horses or found sufficient game to feed themselves, let alone ambush Yellow Hair.
20. As Frank Waters tells it, for example. See *Pumpkin Seed Point* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1969) for a lengthy Jungian discussion of the "Indian" soul.
21. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, p. 22.

22. *Ibid.*
23. Black Elk, *Sacred Pipe*, p. 92. There are explanations of the direction wheel in a number of sources. Hyemehosts Storm in *Seven Arrows* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) and Hamilton A. Tyler in *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) are two good sources. Few adequate accounts of Indian religions or philosophy can be without some discussion of this.
24. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, pp. 25-26.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 40 and 43.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 35. I have included all the lines of the songs, as is proper, though Neihardt only indicates where the repetitions go.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-65.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-80.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-79.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-51. See also Stands-in-Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, and Natalie Curtis, ed., *The Indians' Book* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), and especially James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Great Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
42. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, p. 169.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.
44. May, *Love and Will*, p. 124.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bailey, Alice A. *A Treatise on White Magic or The Way of the Disciple*. New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1951.
- Black Elk. *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971.
- Castaneda, Carlos. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.
- . *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*. New York: Pocket Books, 1972.
- . *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lesson of Don Juan*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- Curtis, Natalie, ed. *The Indians' Book: Songs and Legends of the American Indians*. New York: Dover Publications, 1968.
- Goetz, Delia and Morley, Sylvanus G., from the translation of Adrián Recinos. *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950.
- Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Mythology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

- Jung, Carl. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Translated by Cary F. Baynes. New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1933.
- Lame Deer, John (Fire) and Erdoes, Richard. *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1972.
- Marriott, Alice and Rachlin, Carol K. *American Indian Mythology*. New York: Mentor Books, 1968.
- May, Rollo. *Love and Will*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969.
- Mooney, James. *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Great Sioux Outbreak of 1890*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
- Murray, Henry A., ed. *Myth and Mythmaking*. New York: George Braziller, 1960.
- Neihardt, John. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Radin, Paul. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Roy, Cal. *The Serpent and the Sun: Myths of the Mexican World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972.
- Stands-in-Timber, John and Liberty, Margot. *Cheyenne Memories*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967.
- Underhill, Ruth M. *Red Man's Religion: Beliefs and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
- . *Singing for Power: The Song Magic of the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938.
- Vickery, John B. *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.
- Waters, Frank. *Pumpkin Seed Point*. Chicago: Sage Press, 1969.