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The Boas Connection in American Indian Mythology: A Research Narrative on Ethnocentrism

CHARLES G. BALLARD

Franz Boas chose as his particular field of study the sea-oriented cultures of the Pacific Northwest. In his lifetime as a working anthropologist he produced, according to Helen Codere, more than 10,000 printed pages about that region.[1] He penned his last statement on folklore in 1938, and his last book was entitled *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955). Commenting on this massive body of material, Melville Jacobs said that for twenty years and more it has been comparable to a storeroom filled with "incomprehensible miscellanea."[2] Incomprehensible, he suggested, because the collecting, translating, classifying, and cross-referencing of Indian myths never gave way to a theoretical statement of meaningful content. Essentially Boas arrived at the conclusion that this mythology of the Northwest had no systematic order and that it must be understood simply as a species of literature which reflected the concerns of the village and the culture.[3]

Other anthropologists and other thinkers have since revisited this "storeroom" to peruse and reshuffle the seemingly disconnected stories again to see if some clue or some meaningful pattern had not been overlooked. From their writings and from the pioneering work of Boas, certain explanatory ideas and useful approaches have emerged, and over a period of time they have come to seem more promising or more basic than others. First, the idea of similarities and differences in myths was a

concept that Boas inherited from earlier investigators but also one which he criticized and helped to redirect.[4] Second, the concept of ethnocentrism, or the question of cultural relativity, was an important theoretical point in the writings of Boas.[5] And third, the matter of a language code, or of a sensory language associated with myth, was only dimly glimpsed; the idea was left for others to develop.[6]

These categories are rather like dossiers on the past. There is not time to examine every transformation, every significant change, nor is it possible to say that a specific beginning somewhere in the past can be described. The value involved here is perhaps in the effort to go as far as possible; the explorer in all of us demands that sooner or later we travel to the frontier, to the final wall beyond which there is strangeness or chaos or merely dull solitude. When the researcher says that there are similarities and differences in myth, the listener, therefore, is prepared for a list of differences in myth; the listener, therefore, is prepared for a list of items or for an explanation of why this is so, too.

There are on the shelves, for instance, about 300 versions of creation myths from across the North American continent which can be reduced to eight different types: the Earth-diver myth, the World Parent, the Emergence myth, the Spider myth, the Fighting or Robbery type, which includes the transformer of the Pacific Northwest, the Ymir myth, meaning that the world is created from the corpse of a dead giant or dead man or woman, the Two Creators and Their Contests, and, finally, the Blind Brother myth, found only in southern California and Arizona.[7] Investigators agree also that the most common and widespread of the myths is a story known as the Magic Flight.[8] It can be traced from one end of the ancient world to the other and it involves a mythic actor dropping various items behind him to block the passage of an enraged pursuer. A comb becomes a forest, a vial of oil becomes a lake, and so forth. The similarities in myths, in other words, are well established. And if regularities are present, the argument goes, a scientific approach of some kind should be possible. The regularities, the underlying patterns, the " 'appalling monotony of the fundamental ideas of mankind all over the globe,' " to use Adolf Bastian's observation, should indicate that a system of some kind is at work.[9]

Not all controversy has disappeared from this particular category, however. It is not so much that the concept of similarities and differences is questioned as that the full implication of the contrast is not totally understood. The category, in a more general way, includes such contrasting sets as unity and diversity, performance and competence, system and theory, syntagmatic chain and paradigmatic series, the universal and the particular, the one and the many, and, last but not least, the foot and the river. The foot presumably belonged to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who said that a person can never step two times into the same river.[10]

It is customary, that is, to say that a kind of early scientific thinking had its beginning when such thinkers began searching for that which was constant as opposed to that which was in a state of flux. The river, like life, like one aspect of language, was forever fluid and always on the move. This distinction at least was formally expressed by the Greeks. It should be noted, however, that in many creation myths there is also a partially hidden statement which says that from the one came the many, from the constant came the observable change, from the foot or hand of the creator came the flux.

The point, finally, is that this analytical approach that is applied to myths also seems to be a structural part of mythology. An important part of myths, that is, reflects our own mental thought patterns. For this reason the clue we search for might well be in a mirror, or, again, the clue might be rejected because we cannot place it properly in time.

The matter of differences in myths may be treated in a similar fashion, but before citing an actual example, it is useful to try to visualize this category against a larger backdrop. When thinking of the last book by Boas, for instance, the reader suddenly becomes aware that a unique confrontation is taking place. We may ask what really happens when a hard-nosed scientist gets lost in an art gallery? What passes through his mind? This unusual scene, of course, is only roughly drawn. The early people of the continent were more than just artists and sculptors as we understand these terms. Still, the book does indicate that Boas was attempting to come to terms with an aspect of Northwest Indian life that seemed very important to those particular cultures. In the small seasonal villages the long centuries, unher-

alded and largely unrecorded, had quietly come and gone. Their ideas, even the most serious, could hardly be called scientific, while their life-style, seemingly inimical to that of European man, appeared merely puzzling.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested that the difference here was that which was observable between two cultures, East and West, and that the modern western culture could be called *hot* and the earlier Indian societies *cold*.[11] The hot society, the one we live in, is linear, open, somewhat like a locomotive because it constantly needs refueling. The Indian cultures, on the other hand, were also, in a way, machines, but they resembled clocks that each year needed rewinding. This rewinding was done primarily by the myths or the rituals or the beliefs that were held in common.

Among the clans and cultures on the Pacific Northwest Coast, the year, it seems, reached a kind of climax in the coldest months when the Winter Ceremonials were held. On the Great Plains, the rewinding was done primarily in the summer months, as it still is at the annual gatherings that take place across the state of Oklahoma. Now, before continuing, the listener may question this comparison for a moment. If value systems are involved, then is the contrast mainly between science and religious practices or between art and technology? The answer, perhaps, is not all that important, but if the latter values are indicated, then the "machines" that were mentioned were *both* noticeably present from the beginning.

In any case, as Boas once made his way through an older art gallery, we who are also influenced by science can only tag along and observe. And for those who love to solve problems, here is an artistic one which could be called typical as well as ancient. Perhaps it should be termed a murderous and rather twisted problem or incident because artists and story-tellers seemingly are often drawn to items of action and violence. This myth-story, then, or fragment or what have you, comes from the Thompson River region of British Columbia and from the tribes known as the Interior Salish. The action will be shortened even more because the theme is not all that difficult.

We hear from the first of a man named Holakwoxa, which means filed-down leg or sharpened leg. He had long hair, he was very fat, he seldom spoke to anyone. Often he would turn his back on the people, and they could hear the sound of filing. But he always covered up his legs, and if anyone asked what

he was doing, he would refuse to lift the blanket and show his legs. After a time, a few discovered what he was doing, and they thought he must be demented. At last the legs were as sharp as awls, and when night came Holakwoxa arose and stabbed all the people sleeping in the lodge. The next day a young man asked Holakwoxa what had happened. He said the people had been killed by a war-party. The young man, of course, was suspicious, and he warned the others. He thought they might be attacked by Holakwoxa. In fact, the very next night the old man entered a neighboring lodge, but the people were not asleep. Still, he attacked them anyway, jumping up and kicking at them and leaping across the room. Many were killed in the ensuing melee, but the young man mentioned earlier had thought to arm himself with a large war-knife. The two then confronted each other and an unusual battle took place. Finally the young man dodged at the right minute and Holakwoxa's foot stuck in the post of the under-ground lodge. He was caught fast but still wildly kicking with his other leg. The young man waited until Holakwoxa stuck his other leg in the post. Then he was able to cut off his head and remove the body, both of which he threw outside to the dogs.[12]

So ends the story of Holakwoxa. Is it an example of sacred writing or a trickster story or a pleasant bedtime anecdote? Boas called it a folktale, but he may have wondered about it nevertheless; at least his student Robert Lowie did, for he wrote that the Assiniboine have a story about a hunter who whittles one of his legs to a point and with it tries to impale his companion. This "odd conceit," Lowie says, is likewise found in British Guiana.[13] Stith Thompson in his research has assigned a motif number to this tale (J2424), which falls under the heading of wise or foolish acts. Thompson also notes that versions of the story are told by the Arapaho, the Cheyenne, the Blackfeet, the Gros Ventre, the Seneca far to the east, and by the Koryak tribe in Siberia.[14] The similarities, in other words, indicate that this story or this theme is probably very old and that it was once important to the Indians. Why it was once an important story is, of course, the central question.

Some help comes from structural anthropology because the researcher is taught to filter out, so to speak, essential elements. In the Cheyenne version, for instance, the "filing-down" is done by Coyote, so the incident turns out to be a strictly humorous one. In the Assiniboine version the filing-down, or whittling,

is assigned to a young hunter, while in a related version from the same tribe the hunters are identified as animal characters. I did not pursue the matter through all the other versions because the answer became gradually clearer. The structural element, in other words, indicated that the sharpened leg was in actuality a movement or an action directed away from the normal human condition and toward nature (the non-human, in essence) or toward an unsocialized condition.

The unstated code that usually applies to stories such as these suggests that the hero, or the actor, is either leaving the village in order to complete his growing process or he is returning to the village after having successfully finished his trials. Although Holakwoxa would be a special instance of the code governing young heroes, it is still noticeable that a direction toward nature and the *outer*-world is strongly suggested.

Another clue is given by Lévi-Strauss when he quotes Boas on the " 'distinctness and individualization of species of animals. . . [which] set them off more clearly as characters of a tale than the undifferentiated members of mankind.' "[15] The point is that the "evil" in Holakwoxa must be set apart in some way from that mere image of an old man. The filed down legs align his character with the over-powering and often malevolent powers of Nature, the fangs, the claws, the beaks. The significance, therefore, of the main action, the whittling of legs, is perhaps clarified by a structural approach, but the differences, or those few that were mentioned, still require a word or two, especially since the matter of ethnocentrism is ever present.

A reductive, classificatory approach, of course, is a valuable part of the usual ethnographic method. A study of differences and similarities can be termed scientific, although there is a point, possibly, of diminishing returns, a boundary of sorts that is left to the interests of the literary critic or the religious historian. Earlier students such as Boas and Lowie, with their cultural-historical emphasis, were no doubt justified in listing the sharpened leg story as an oddity. Structuralism also normally rests its case when lines of influence, or "tracings" from the cultural "network" (called "codes" in the terminology of Roland Barthes), are established.[16] The student of literature, for his part, is left with a resurrected skeleton and the problem of placing a few imaginary feathers on what must have been a bird. Also, if *ethnocentrism* says, in effect, that we are programmed with a complete inventory of cultural biases, and if *cultural rel-*

ativism says that the cultural map that the other villager uses is always different from our own, then, in essence, two strikes have already been called. Nevertheless, there is still a literary problem associated with this Salish story that needs to be addressed, and it has to do with a more specific audience response.

The Salish story-teller assigned the action to an old man who was living with the People but who turned his back on them. The incident, as it is handled, is certainly not humouous, unless one is quite removed from anxiety, as children sometimes are. In literature, also, there are two polarities that attract the writer or artist because his subject matter seems to lean toward one or the other, that is toward total chaos—war, destruction, insanity—or toward absolute or complete order, as in geometrical figures or, possibly, in the thoughts of an accountant or a saint. Beginning near the middle of the spectrum, in the sharpened-leg story, the action is fairly direct but also surprising. In an Indian society, it may be surmised, an old man, especially one living in the North, could find reason enough for letting go, for turning his back on the People. Yet, these elderly people are expected to keep the faith; they must not give in but must, at all costs, stay on the side of order, decency, humanity. The difference in the myths with the sharpened-leg theme suggests that this conscious or unconscious decision may affect young or old alike and with either humorous or tragic consequences. The similarity is found not only in the filing-down that is done but in the introduction of disorder and even death to an area of life, to an otherwise orderly and peaceful realm.

Willa Cather in her book *Death Comes for the Archbishop* describes two young priests who exemplified the orderly life and who were true to their convictions to the end, which is to say, the reader meets Bishop Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant at the beginning and at the end of the book; the rest is concerned with an odd assortment of characters, including an old priest named Friar Baltazar Montoya. He was also old and fat and he also turned his back against the People. His tyranny over the Indians grew little by little until, at a sumptuous feast one day, he struck one of his Indian servants with a heavy object and killed him. The other priests sitting at the table beat a hasty retreat, leaving Baltazar to his fate. The dreaded event soon followed, for Baltazar was killed and his body was thrown over the mesa wall.[17] Could this incident also be called an "odd conceit"? If so, it is

very close to one of the great themes of literature, for Baltazar could be transformed by skillful story-tellers into a King Lear or into a Lucifer in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The difference, again, is in the treatment of the theme.

Naturally the sharpened-leg story does not readily yield to our programmed insights unless it is handled as something of a thought-problem and with an awareness that at every frontier there is always a currency exchange and a subtle realignment in values. Undeniably we may feel that Holakwoxa is but a shadow of the more understandable Baltazar, just as a visitor to a museum may casually examine the many artifacts of the past and mentally note that his own possessions are far superior, more durable, in fact, and just as pleasing to the eye. The observer begins to feel good about his opportunities, his way of life, and it is at this point that ethnocentrism comes into play.

There are, certainly, many aspects of an earlier tribal life that a modern thinker does well to dislike, and such feelings can be expressed. It is another matter, however, when one begins to suspect that this group or that tribe in the past was not capable of thinking straight. The cultural products, when seen across the wall of history and across the centuries, are as well made, as carefully constructed, and quite as durable as our cherished items. As Lévi-Strauss has suggested, the human mind was functioning equally well back then; the difference has been in the material, the use to which it is put, and in the acquisition of skills which often go hand in hand with a simple population increase.[18]

Consider for a moment a contrast.

David Hume, the philosopher, stated that there was never a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even an individual eminent either in action or speculation. As for the rest, he said, there was " 'no ingenious manufacturer among them, no arts, no sciences . . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.' "[19]

And nature, it is also said, is not the only factor to consider. John Bachman, a collaborator of John Audubon and the minister of a Lutheran congregation in the South, offered Biblical justification for an ethnocentric point of view. In Holy Scripture, he pointed out, Noah blessed the descendants of Shem by making them "the parents of the Caucasian race—the progenitor of the

Israelites and our Savior." The Mongolians were the children of Japheth, and, as the Bible predicted, many of them are still living in tents. Ham was the third of Noah's sons and the ancestor of the black "servant of servant" race.[20] A charter myth, it might be mentioned here, is one which attempts to validate a claim, usually to some bit of territory. This charter aspect can be recognized in the Noah story, for the myth says that this land belongs to us and not to them. Other elements, which have led to other strange opinions, have also surfaced in this myth, but I will postpone comment for now because it is important to view this matter of ethnocentrism from several sides.

Robert Lowie stated, for instance, that " 'the modern scientific procedure is to refrain from *all* subjective judgments.' "[21] In theory this approach should solve the problem of ethnocentrism. A person should try to be objective, although, in the world of important relationships, such a position is not exactly as neutral as one is often led to believe. My purpose in citing the scientific position, in any case, stems from my interest in the matter and also from a suspicion that a contradiction of some kind is involved. Objectivity is now, because of many trials in the past, a prestigious and desirable cultural trait of the West, but it also means that somewhere along the way a lecturer must necessarily make mincemeat of the subject matter he is studying, simply because belief systems are involved.

It is therefore not so much a matter of humility when it is stated that only a glimpse of the past is given. A brief and distant glimpse, in fact, is all that is possible, for the subtle and so-called neutral approach is in actuality an attack against tribalism, all forms of nationalism, and any belief system which attempts to escape deliberative and informed evaluation. Once again, therefore, an ethnocentric viewpoint seems somehow very durable.

It is durable, in the opinion of many, because it is also the wisest course of action for a person who wants to protect his own. Differences have always meant danger, while similarity, regularity, the endlessly repeated dance step, the ritual, and the recognizable pattern have usually meant security. Across a broad range of differences, however, similarities get lost or become suspect. There is no good reason to explore the hidden pathways unless an individual becomes convinced that there is a greater security to be gained by adopting another viewpoint, or by establishing a larger identity. The teacher's goal in this whole

area, then, may simply be to equalize sentiment or to balance out beliefs. In this respect, Indian material and other cultural ideas have a proper place in the curriculum. Indian groups, by their very existence, have made a strong educational impact in this country.

Such an examination of terms, of course, is a vital part of any cross-cultural study. *Creative ethnicity* should mean that a person will build upon his differences—his usual background, his racial heritage—and not be swallowed up by them or retreat into some limited belief-system. A logical starting place is still the past, if one is truly interested in clearing up misconceptions. The Indian material, it should also be remembered, has a structural kinship with all myths, at least in the emphasis of modern structuralist thinkers. The question of universal traits does seem pertinent, that is, when the reader attempts to analyze the personality or function of one much maligned figure that readily comes to mind, and who needs no apologies, viz. the mythic-actor known as the trickster.

If this being was said to create people and even the world, as certain early anthropologists wrote in careful phrases, then in Western terms he was nothing less than, but incredibly, an Indian deity. Was it possible, then, for such a creator to do all manner of shameful acts and also to manifest himself in the form of a large white hare or as a coyote or as a raven? And what of the people who could dream up such a shameful creator? The questions here, clearly, need to be rephrased, for ethnocentrism once again has brought about a slanted view. The question should be, "Is it possible to have religion without a theology?" And the second question should be, "Is the very term religion imprecise when applied to an earlier culture?" The answer to both questions clearly would be "Yes."[22] Yet, it is a bit tedious to pursue this line of philosophical thought; complete order, once again, is no longer a literature for entertainment and instruction but a set of traffic rules or a religious tract that demands obedience. It is better to remain with an everyday variety of order called *the acceptable life* and try to determine how the trickster fits into this picture.

The myths and the ethnographies, for instance, seem to say that in a person's life there is an initial period of vain, aimless, irresponsible, and selfish behavior. After perhaps one-third of a person's life has passed, however, this individual must settle down and find his place in the world. It is expected, simply,

that he will do so. This young man realizes also that there are varieties of order beyond the confines of the camp or the home, that there are particular skills or powers associated with certain animal tribes, that there are spirit-helpers, and that there is order, as well as disorder, in nature, or a close conjunction between life and death, success and failure.

Naturally there had to be an educational system of some kind, a way of remembering important lessons, and a teacher who would act as a mediator between the real world of nature and the life within the camp. The ancient trickster, appearing in complete myth-cycles and in disconnected folktales, adequately and cheerfully fulfilled this role. His bragging ways, his lecherous behavior, his scatological tendencies were famous across an entire continent, which is to say, his role and his character were consistent and true to form in spite of the many cultures he invaded. Also, the order, the propriety, and the discipline which he seemed to revile and mock were always diametrically opposed to his actions. Perhaps in the actual world of the camp the rules for important relationships and proper conduct became an unspoken commentary on all that he did. Certainly, then, it is important to stress *this teaching aspect* specifically because a generation and more of writers and scientists have looked at the trickster and have seen only disorder or the peccadilloes of an uncivilized id.

It is also no secret that the trickster, as he is often presented in the oral transmissions, comes across for the most part as a visual blur. His shape-changing characteristics and his ability to be as small as an insect or as large as a tree possibly ruled out any further questions on the part of early field workers about the physical appearance of the trickster. "According to Oglala theology," Paul Radin writes, "Trickster, there called *Iktomi,* i.e. Spider, was the first-born son of the Rock and a being called the Winged One."[23] On other parts of the continent he took the form of a hare, a coyote, or a raven, while still retaining certain human qualities. And there are other indeterminate aspects to his character, especially as this mythic actor begins to assume the functions of a northern transformer or traveler, or as he moves along the mythic spectrum toward a more definite messiah figure or, in another direction, toward a set of twins.

The twins and the messiah figure, as conceptual stages along a time-line, are useful terms for an old problem. From the first there has been a sincere effort to transfer the idea or the concept

of a trickster into Western ideational experience, an attempt, in short, to read an older cultural map. The theories and the efforts, from the time of Edward B. Tylor and Franz Boas, have shown in the main, and perhaps unintentionally, that language itself is a formidable barrier. After careful and extensive study, we are still inclined to call early concepts illogical, ridiculous, or simplistic, when the matter is only one of cultural difference. The time-line mentioned above, which is only a part of "a series of mediating devices" in structuralist methodology, does seem to adjust, therefore, more precisely to the trickster's "ambiguous and equivocal character."[24] It may also help to remember that there can be found in the Americas the not unusual view of evolution which suggests that *animals evolved from humans*.[25]

The point, naturally, is not precisely or overtly made, but in more than one instance it is, in the light of certain myths, a logical inference. In terms of textual study it is even a necessary inference, for the myths ordinarily are predicated on a golden age and in a time in which special conditions were thought to prevail. Such a reversal of thought, or its possibility, which could be called the norm (because it indicates the outward flow of language and ideas), could certainly deflect the intent of many Western terms. At least, when Karl Kerényi writes that the trickster in the Winnebago myth "has nothing like the universality and plasticity of the Greek divinities," one may then suspect that the later conceptual limits to the word "human" (and by extension to the various important deities) eventually became an informative and decisive factor.[26]

In terms of literature, one may therefore presume, the trickster is the story of a nature deity trying to become human. And in the sense that he raises questions and inspires comment about the human condition his role of benefactor is fulfilled. Very often the trickster puts on a front and assumes pretentiously a stance of arrogance, only to be ignobly deflated before one and all. Yet, in a warrior society arrogance is a manly and admirable trait, if there is substance rather than falsehood behind the pose. The arrogant warrior, wise in the ways of battle, is a source of strength and comfort to the community.

Should the trickster, then, undergo further *literary* transformations, it is likely that he would have more to say about the strictly human factor for certain of his inchoate human manifestations in other myths that begin to slough off the perversities of the unknown, which can be noticed in the boldness of

Prometheus, in the stupidity of Epimetheus, in the strength and naivete of Hercules, and especially in the cunning and in the rashness of Odysseus.

But the trickster, finally, belongs primarily to the hunting—gathering cultures. His message over and over again is *to think before you act*. He could exist only at a time when the hunters still had some admiration and respect for the animals they killed. His humor, outlandish as it is, also indicates the presence of a critical viewpoint, which in turn was very likely a part of a highly disciplined and spartan-like existence.

In episode eleven of the Winnebago Cycle, for example, the Trickster comes upon a lake and notices that a person in a black suit is standing on the opposite shore.[27] This person is seemingly pointing at him. Wakdjunkaga calls out, "Say, my younger brother, what are you pointing at?" He receives no answer, even though he asks several times. The man across the lake stands still and continues to point. "Well," the trickster says, "if that's the way it's going to be, I, too, shall do that." And so he takes up his position, dons a black shirt, and begins to point back at the man.

Time passes and Wakdjunkaga's arm is almost breaking from the effort; still, he does not want to be outdone. He badgers the man on the opposite shore and finally suggests that they take a short break for food, after which they will resume their pointing. Still the man does not answer. Finally, in disgust, the trickster walks away. Only then does he notice that the "man" he had been pointing at was a large black tree stump with one dead limb pointing in his direction.

The episode seems at first to be a slight bit of comic stupidity. Since the cycle has opened, however, with an unnamed chief about to go to war, the confrontation that Wakdjunkaga has by the lakeshore contains another meaning: not only is it a laconic thrust at a certain perverse strain in the human character but it is also a comment on the warrior's vaunted pride. "Wakdjunkaga," the myth-maker seems to say, "will now show you what it means *never to retreat*." As a parody of courage, therefore, the point is there for all to see.

The critical viewpoint, again, is present in the passage, and the teacher is also present, which is to say, a sense of order is present as an active value in the literature. It allows the individual, if he is receptive and alert, to make acceptable cultural judgments. "Not to be like the trickster!" must have been a

deadly kind of warning to the young, for scorn and ridicule are potent weapons in a rigid society.

There are instances enough of warriors who refused to return to their villages from unsuccessful raiding parties and accounts of young men who rode off to war because young women or the old began to talk about their lack of bravery. The process of slander and innuendo, after all, is not mysterious or peculiar only to pre-contact America, but it may be significant to note that a being like the trickster was once a dominant force on many parts of the continent. His presence says much about the iron-clad rules and conventions which once shaped the affairs of men.

The language code of myth, finally, may be defined as verbal or non-verbal signs, usually in a related cluster, that are implicitly understood by a particular culture. Further, such signs are ordinarily stable diachronically and culturally explicit synchronically. Dialects, for example, are diachronic variations of a language, but, as has been noted, they do not necessarily change the basic structure of the language (its diachronic aspect). Neither do historical events change the basic structural outlook of the tribe, although the historical event may shape the experience of the tribe and be synchronically revealing. Saussure, for instance, took an example from economics to illustrate the synchronic fact that a dime equals two nickels, while, diachronically, the same coin sometimes equals x portion of a franc and sometimes a y portion, which, as it is stated, is a diachronic fact.[28]

The structures of myths, therefore, are essentially hidden signs which establish an overlapping relationship among certain myths but which appear (to the outsider) as though synchronically complete. The oral transmission of ideas, certainly not from one source or from one continent, was once active in the ancient world and on the move, like the river of Heraclitus. The stop-action process of the printed page captured a single myth and, more often than not, the example gave only hints of a larger scene. Often the isolated myth was like a single bead that belonged to some ancient necklace. The structural thread that was not readily seen only became apparent when similar beads of this color or that were placed next to each other. In essence, the comparison of related myths is a continuation of the translation process, for there is an attempt to make implicit metaphors explicit.

A glossary of these implicit metaphors would be useful but very likely impractical; impractical, in my opinion, because there are many gray areas and because particular and revealing interpretations from a regional complex of myths are ordinarily explanations of closely connected synchronic units. In other words, there are related cultural viewpoints that are indigenous to the far North, to the Pacific Northwest, to the Great Plains, and so forth, to which the workings of a more general mind—the subconscious, the diachronic line, or Nature itself—make a contribution. An approach such as this tends to stress myths as a manifestation of preliterate systematic thinking.[29] As for the religious viewpoint, which is better handled under the heading of world-view, the observer will very likely perceive that the *concrete science* of early times (which is the knowledge of significant relationships) and the so-called perennial philosophy that springs from various regions form a completely overlapping system.[30]

The student is advised, then, to gradually become acquainted with the sensory language of myth by taking note of certain general movements, or structural progressions, in the myths. For instance, there is often a subtle dialectical exchange in many stories between what is felt to be the socialized human sphere of action and the unsocialized world of nature. Being unsocialized, of course, would not be always bad but rather in the category of different, as well as in the category of those who are separately skilled. If a selection of archaic viewpoints is absorbed, therefore, it will soon be clear, as Mircea Eliade suggests, that early man also had a desire to know his world and that he was merely more explicit in thinking that with a "knowledge of the origin of each thing" there came also "a kind of magical mastery over it."[31]

It would be more correct to say, on second thought, that a glossary of sorts has been compiled; it is entitled *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, by Stith Thompson. It enables the student to draw together many far-flung themes in order to check on similarities and differences, which is to say, it permits the researcher to begin. The comment about regional complexity still stands, even to the extent that most specific examples of implicit metaphors are affected, mainly because they exist, after all, as a culturally-modified series of relationships.

The sharpened leg of Holakwoxa may be the Salish treatment of the theme, for instance, and as such may resemble other stories from Siberia to British Guiana; but it is also possible that

sharp objects as part of the human body suggest something less than human, or the presence of unsocialized behavior from the world of Nature, and in this respect may also have a female side, viz. the numerous examples of vagina dentata. The myths, then, are not always describing monsters but ordinary people, who, like the trickster, have not yet gotten their heads on straight.

It is also well to note that the trickster is usually drawn with cultural codes that reflect, in essence, the larger elementals—the coming of life and death, fertility and death, the promise of the eastern sun and its inevitable decline in the west. For many of the tricksters across the continent, the hidden sign is not only the relationship between this actor and the scavenger in nature, which ties this figure to the animal kingdom, but also the presence of a definite color scheme, indicating supernatural origin. Where the color scheme is not readily apparent, as in the image of Coyote (he is anti-day, or black, indirectly) or in the make-up of the lesser known Haxige, one of the Sioux tricksters who became a deer, the gathering-scavenging function comes to the fore.[32]

The matter of colors being associated with the four directions, naturally, is nothing new. To point out the associated references, however, is to work more directly toward a particular cultural code. The color *white,* for instance, usually has primary significance in the myths. As a sign it often seems to stress the new day arriving, the special beginning, the influence of the supernatural, and the promise of fertility. Among certain tribes of the Great Plains, the eastern color is *red,* while the opposite color for the west, in most regions, is *black.* Consider the following pairs: manabozho, the Great White Hare of the Algonquians, and his brother Chibiabos; Manabush and the Wolf, Menominee; Messou and the Lynx, Montagnais; Glooscap and the Marten, Micmac; Wenebojo and his brother, Chippewa.[33] In some tribes the trickster is alone: Wihio as the Spider, or White Man, Cheyenne; Na'pi, "dawn-light-color-man," or Old Man, Blackfeet; and Txämsem the Raven, Tsimshian.[34] Consider also White Buffalo Woman of the Sioux, White Shell Woman of the Navajo, and Che-che-puy-ew-tis the white (old) beaver chieftain, Northern Cree.[35] Such a listing is not definitive; there is a veritable network of ideas emanating from each of these actors, a network, that is, which is roughly composed of basic, recognizable concepts related to natural features of the environment. The eastern sun, springtime fecundity, and rabbits, for instance, are

metaphorically related, whereas across the world and in other oral traditions the hare and the color white have kept a portion of their mythological meaning while changing somewhat euphemistically, over a period of time, into bridal gowns, Easter bunnies, and Playboy bunnies.[36]

In the northwest part of North America there is also the Raven, a creature that is capable of suggesting metaphorically a whole set of environmental contraries: white and black, day and night, winter and summer, land and sea, earth and sky, and the four directions. Tsimshian mythology picks up these opposites, while Middle Eastern myths, especially the Noah story, seem to play with the idea of the white dove (the white skin) and the black raven (the burned skin) as instances of either the sky and the earth or of good and evil. Just as these birds in the Apocryphal tradition are sent out from the Ark, so are Noah's sons in the Biblical version similarly sent out to become the three races of mankind.[37]

The New World treatment of these opposites, perhaps, was not as exacting. If life can be compared to a day in time, then the Algonquian pairs indicate a beginning and an end, the coming of the new and the slow decline that follows. In the myths a third brother, more durable, is usually killed; he seems to suggest the permanence and the wide dispersion of rocks, for he is often referred to as Flint.[38] A Santee myth speaks of Unktomi being robbed of his dinner. The trickster proceeds to commit suicide "in such a manner that only a small and charred part of him remained, and this resembled the form of a spider."[39] The mid-continent colors, red and black, are not obtrusive but they are present, just as the Tsimshian cycle makes a point of saying that the Raven was once white.

To be old or pale in color meant, in fact, that a person had joined a select group; for the elders were those who had somehow found favor with diverse powers and who now spoke from experience; their reward—whether envied or rejected by the young—was life itself. Also, at the very fount of life were the white animals, the *wakan* (sacred) beings of the animal world. The literature is replete with examples. White Buffalo Woman brings the sacred pipe and also the promise of fertility to the Sioux, while in the Southwest Changing Woman or White Shell Woman has some part in the creation of the Earth Surface People. These sacred women, as well as the white beaver of the Northern Cree, are in essence one-sided figures who stand out-

side the human community. They are also more direct projections of the sun's influence. " 'The evidence is quite convincing,' " Gladys Reichard states, " 'that all of these master symbols represent the same thing, Sun's Weapons which aid man in controlling the recalcitrant elements in the universe.' "[40]

Yet, it should again be emphasized that exactness in any value attached to any particular sign was not at a premium. There was once an undependable aspect to things, a strange twist which perhaps characterized the hunter's world. Certainly the New World myths were not ready to be categorical about either the good or the bad. "Evil," A. B. Rooth observed, "is a concept which only has full meaning in a religion which wants to show a concept of complete goodness."[41]

In conclusion, then, the similarities and differences in myths are important and useful categories for the study of early patterns of thought. The similarities permit a detailed comparison of problematic language elements and possible semantic variations that occur within and among cultural regions of the continent. The intent of the larger scent and the enigmatic fragment can be determined at times only by close attention to variants, which, in some instances, are scattered across the length and breadth of the two Americas. The differences, on the other hand, move closer to the individual and the particular cultural viewpoint. Few valid statements about early material can be made without a thorough acquaintance with two or three cultural systems. Boas, with his cultural-historical emphasis, stressed the differences and so preserved invaluable keys to systems that even then were beginning to disappear.

Boas also understood clearly the problem of cultural relativity and ethnocentrism. In the first instance the observer must reserve judgment or attempt to understand conduct and action in the context of another cultural system. There must be an effort, in other words, to remove emotional or other subjective connotations. Ethnocentrism suggests that it is not an easy matter "to step back" from our own cultural upbringing and our particular viewpoints. Our language and our very thought processes are turned in certain cultural directions which seem to us advanced, proper, normal, even unalterable. To be objective and scientific, in a sense, is to be Westernized; yet, it is the only common ground so far devised upon which conflicting values and rhetorical systems can meet.

The language code, finally, is largely the work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. As an analytical approach and as an epistemology, it is anchored in folk-loristic studies in the two Americas and in European linguistic theory. Its application in areas of New World mythology that seemed too esoteric or backward to be of general interest has surprisingly provided fresh insights into matters of philosophical interest. The values of early thinkers and the cultural contours of the past have been touched on in significant ways. Oral transmissions, as part of a network of semantic relationships and cultural conventions, are better understood as related progressions of modified similarities, such that a basic intent or the nature of the implicit metaphor begins to emerge. At this systematic level of consciousness the synchronic configurations in turn begin to adjust. The term *sharpness,* for instance, is more important then the term *leg* in the Salish story of Holakwoxa; just as the play of opposite values in the personality of the trickster is more important than his latest escapade. To shed light on even one myth from the past, in fact, makes the language code, or structuralism, worthwhile.

The Boas connection, in any case, still stands. The work of this anthropologist allows the student to glimpse an earlier world, to be exposed to another way of thinking. The solidarity of life takes on meaning, while illusion is understood for what it is, no matter what its theatrical or sacred trappings. Such a study can also remind us that humans have an important artistic side that goes far back in time. But the last and most important value of studying myths is that we arrive finally at a deeper understanding of ourselves. The boundaries of our world are not established. They depend, finally, on what we are able to understand of our yesterdays and of our present times.

NOTES

1. Helen Codere, "The Understanding of the Kwakiutl," *The Anthropology of Franz Boas: Essays on the Centennial of His Birth,* ed. Walter Goldschmidt (San Francisco: American Anthropological Association, 1959), p. 61. Hereafter cited as *Centennial Essays.*

2. Melville Jacobs, "Folklore," *Centennial Essays, p. 128.*

3. *Franz Boas, Tsimshian Mythology* (1909–10 and 1916; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970), pp. 872–881. See also the Preface to his *Bella Bella Tales* (New York: Vol. 25 of the Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society, 1932), pp. v–x.

4. Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and Edward B. Taylor (1832–1917) were precursors for Boas; Bastian's "elementary ideas" and "folk ideas" are explained by Boas in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 193 f.; Taylor's theories and the matter of the "psychic unity of mankind" are treated generally in a scholarly volume by Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble, *They Studied Man* (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 50–68.

5. The racial arrogance that leads to ethnocentrism can easily be found in most ethnologies before 1900. For a precise account of theories see Paulo de Carvalho-Neto, *The Concept of Folklore*, trans. Jacques M. P. Wilson (Coral Gables, Flor.: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971) and for a recent and in depth account see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), esp. the chapters on Boas and Robert H. Lowie.

6. It is best to go directly to books dealing with structuralism, such as Edmund Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Viking, 1970), Leach, ed., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), and Octavio Paz, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: An Introduction*, trans. J. S. Bernstein and Maxine Bernstein (New York: Dell, 1970). See then Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963) and the two books on South American myths *The Raw and the Cooked* and *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969, 1973).

7. Anna Birgitta Rooth, "The Creation Myths of the North American Indians," *Anthropos*, 52 (1957), 479–508.

8. Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indian* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1929), n. 205, p. 333.

9. Quoted by Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, p. 165.

10. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 45.

11. See Georges Charbonnier, ed., *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1969), p. 33.

12. Franz Boas, ed., *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes* (1917; rpt. New York: Kraus, 1969), p. 36.

13. Robert Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (Garden City, New York: Natural History Press, 1954), pp. 137–42.

14. Thompson, n. 95 f., p. 299. The Cheyenne version is given in Thompson's anthology.

15. *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicholson, Ltd. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 136.

16. See Peggy Rosenthal, "Deciphering S/Z," *College English, 37 (1975)*, 126 f. This article gives a lucid account of structuralism's approach to modern literature.

17. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927; rpt. New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 103–14.

18. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, p. 230.

19. Quoted by Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), p. 88.

20. Harris, p. 91 f.

21. Quoted by Harris, p. 163.

22. For a scholarly examination of this question of religion and the anthropologist, see John A. Saliba, "Religion and the Anthropologists, 1960–1976," *Anthropologica, 18 (1976), 179–213,* and Part II of this same article in *Anthropologica,* 19 (1977), 177–208. One of the more inclusive definitions of religion is given, Saliba says, by Clifford Geertz (1966): " 'Religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, prevasive, and longlasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic,' " Part I, p. 184 f. This definition is criticized, Saliba adds, by Marvin Harris as being too inclusive, because it incorporates science within it as well. The objection, however, seems rather a confirmation of the soundness of the definition.

23. Paul Radin, *The Trickster* (New York: Schocken Books, 1956), p. 165.

24. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology,* p. 226.

25. Perhaps ten or so myths scattered throughout Lévi-Strauss's South American volumes, *From Honey to Ashes* and *The Raw and the Cooked,* support this view, as well as myths from the Labrador Peninsula and the Alaskan area. See Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 49, and the Sedna myth presented in Stith Thompson, *Tales,* p. 3 f.

26. See Radin, p. 176.

27. Radin, p. 13 f.

28. Dorothy B. Selz, "Structuralism for the Non-Specialist: A Glossary and a Bibliography," *College English,* 37 (1975), pp. 162 and 165.

29. James A. Boon, *From Symbolism to Structuralism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 127.

30. For a more detailed discussion of *concrete science,* see Boon, p. 125, and Howard Gardner, *The Quest for Mind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 213. Much of Lévi-Strauss's thought on this matter can be found in his book *The Savage Mind;* the term itself is used on p. 66.

31. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality,* trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). p. 76.

32. J. Owen Dorsey, "Nanibozhu in Siouan Mythology," *Journal of American Folklore,* 5 (1892), 303.

33. See Hartley Burr Alexander, *North American Mythology,* vol. 13 of *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1916), p. 39, and Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 15–17.

34. See George Bird Grinnell, *By Cheyenne Campfires* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 281, and *Blackfoot Lodge Tales: The Story of a Prairie People* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp. 138 and 256.

35. See Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (American Museum of Natural History, 1962), p. 181; Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 11; and Robert Bell, "The History of the Che-Che-Puy-Ew-Tis," *Journal of American Folklore,* 10 (1897), 1–8.

36. The Venerable Bede indicated that the hare was "the 'favorite animal and attendant spirit' of the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre," who represented spring fecundity, and love and carnal pleasure that leads to fecundity. See John A. Boyle, "The Hare in Myth and Reality: A Review Article," *Folklore,* 84 (1973), p. 323.

37. See Anna Birgitta Rooth, *The Raven and the Carcass* (Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Helsinki, 1962), pp. 14, 36, and 236 f. Rooth states that in the oldest complete flood story from the seventh-century B. C. the birds sent out were a dove, a swallow, and a raven. She adds, "The picture of the dove and the raven as antipoles—both in colour and in nature—first developed, according to my opinion, in Jewish Christian symbolism."

38. Thompson, pp. 10 and 15, and Barnouw, p. 15.

39. Dorsey, p. 300.

40. Quoted by Kluckhohn and Leighton, p. 182.

41. Rooth, *The Raven and the Carcass*, p. 240.