

SURVIVORS AND RENEWERS

Dell Hymes

I am honored that the editors of *Folklore Forum* found stimulation for this issue in my 1974 address, and glad to contribute to it.

The address was a quarter-century ago, but I would not much change what I said then about a dialectic between tradition and situation, mediated by re-creation, and spurred by a human need to traditionalize. Work such as that in Feintuch (1995) deepens such thoughts. I am struck particularly by the felicity of Glassie's opening dictum, "tradition is the creation of the future out of the past," or, as he rephrases it at the end, "tradition is the means for deriving the future from the past" (Glassie 1995:393, 409).¹ I want to discuss an example of that, if one can rephrase yet further: "tradition offers means for facing the future, having faced the past."

Sun's Nature

I have in mind the myth with which my 1974 address ended, "Sun's Nature" (to be exact about the second word), told to Franz Boas more than a century ago by Charles Cultee, the only person, so far as is known, then capable of telling myths in Kathlamet Chinook, or indeed, its sister language, Chinook proper.

What Cultee told Boas is original, strikingly so. There is nothing else like it known from the region. There is much that can no longer be known, of course. Still, from what is known, this myth stands apart.

Those who have read or heard the myth realize it is an account of the destruction of the towns pertaining to a chief, destruction brought on by his own *hybris*. Living near the coast, he can not see the sun rise, and decides to go east toward it, despite cautioning from his wife. After days of travel, beyond any people, he comes to a large house and a young girl. The house is filled with wealth on either side. The girl explains that when she is ready to marry (menarche), her mother will give the wealth away. He stays, and there is a characteristic Chinookan scene for the union of a hero and a woman associated with spiritual power. Each morning the mother (the Sun) goes out early (to carry the sun across the sky); each evening she returns with various kinds of wealth. The scene ends, "Every day like this."

The chief becomes homesick (natural enough, in native terms). The mother offers him every kind of human goods, but he refuses. He wants the shining thing she carries each day. When he looks at it, his eyes close, but he wants only that. His wife tells him she will never give it to anyone, but finally she does. One cannot forever refuse a relative. But she warns him, and gives him an axe as well.

He comes to each town of his people in turn. Each time what he carries says, "We two shall strike your town," he loses consciousness; when he recovers, there is blood, he has destroyed his people. Each time he tries to rid himself of what he carries and cannot. He reaches his own town, he tries to stop, but cannot.² When he recovers, the old woman is there.

He looked back.

Now she is standing near him, that old woman.

"You,"

she told him,

"You.

"In vain I try to love you.

In vain I try to love your relatives.

"Why do you weep?

It is you who choose.

Now you carried that 'blanket' of mine."

Now she took it,

she lifted off what he had taken.

Now she left him,

she went home.

He stayed there,

he went a little distance.

There he built a house,

a small house.

If you know the history of the Pacific Northwest, you know no European ship crossed the bar of the Columbia river until 1792, and that at the time Chinookan-speaking people dominated either side of the river's mouth. They were wealthy through local resources and trade, and socially stratified, with slaves. A half-century later few were left. Most had died through introduced diseases (cf. Boyd 1994; Rubin 1999, ch. 23, "Cole Sik Waum Sik" August 1830).

“Sun’s Nature” is a way of thinking that experience. Of course Cultee was quite aware of what we would consider history—steady encroachment of whites as traders and missionaries and settlers and eventually soldiers, new goods, new weapons, another language, forced removal from the river. None of this appears in the myth. The myth addresses the nature of a power understood to sustain the world, and which in the myth, still does.³

At the very end, indeed, the myth changes form in expressing this. After a brief introduction, everything has been told in terms of relations of three and five (and in catalogs, ten). But after the old woman’s final speech to the chief, each of the two has just a pair of verses, four in all. Four-part relations in fact have been discovered within several western Native American narratives as a foregrounding of a woman or women, as actors or as premise (see Hymes 1999).

Creativity of survivors

Again and again, in coming to know better some of the tellings in the region by survivors, I come to a sense of a mind working within the framework of a tradition, still wrestling with the nature of figures in the myths and relations among them. Thereby in their tellings carrying tradition further. Exercising a kind of creativity inherent in the tradition, I would argue.

The traditions themselves, after all, were not closed, but open. In principle the way things were was explained in stories. One might not have heard a story explaining this creature or that landscape or some kind of human conduct such as men marrying women and lying to them (see the Maidu myth in Hymes 1999), but someone else might have. And the stories one knew could be extended or linked in good faith. No one would have thought of oneself as an “author.” One might think of oneself as coming to understand more deeply.

This is not to say that there is nothing at all from which the myth Cultee told may have come. There is a recurrent plot in the region in which a young man reaches a house, finds a young woman, and marries her, or wishes to marry her, but has to overcome a hostile father or father-in-law. And in fact such a story has come to light upriver from among the Wishram, Chinookan speakers across from The Dalles, Oregon, a source for transformation that Cultee could have known (Trafzer 1998:44–46, Hines 1998:183–85).⁴ If not this version, then some other along the river seems likely to have been a starting point for Cultee.⁵

Biblical excursus

I am not suggesting that Cultee was the first Kathlamet speaker to revise a story, or to imagine a story adequate to experience with a sense of continuing a tradition. I assume that communities are like that, that they always have members who are creative in that way. There is indeed a parallel close to hand, one whose refashionings of narratives in good faith are well known and continue to be studied. I am thinking, of course, of the recreations over the centuries of the Jewish and Christian traditions. (I don't discuss Islamic and East and South Asian traditions because I barely know them).

Some associate these traditions of our own society with pedantry and literalism, dogma and inquisition. And of course there is much in history to give them a bad name. As Native Americans well knew, religious power can be dangerous.

Yet both in Native American communities and for many members of Jewish and Christian communities, the point of having stories was for those who encounter them to make them their own. Therein, of course, is a continuing source of change. Let me quote a study of the Dutch theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx:

telling stories properly also involved being caught up in them...in the end what we are concerned with is the fusing of two stories, the story of the gospel tradition of faith and the story of our own personal and communal life.... Tradition and its interpretation can therefore be summed up in another of Schillebeeckx's formidable phrases, "the tradition of faith which discloses meaning with liberating force." (Bowden 1983:134-35)

No rote learning there.

Or compare a feminist scholar, concerned to avoid the faults of other feminist scholars:

...their ahistorical examination of the Bible, and their homogenization of its diversity. My readings call for a consideration of the heterogeneity of the Hebrew canon, for an appreciation of the variety of socio-ideological horizons evident in this composite text. (Pardes 1992:3)

The general truth is that these traditions have been questioned and reconfigured from as early as we know them. To give two examples:

1) There are two accounts of the origin of man and woman in Genesis, one simultaneous (1:27), one successive (2:21-24), accompanied outside the canon by a story of Adam's first wife, Lilith.⁶

2) In Exodus 20:24 the Lord tells Moses “in *every* place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you,” but in Deuteronomy 12:1–4, Moses first says that the Lord told them to demolish all the places where the nations they are about to dispossess served their gods; then (12:5–14) the Israelites are told “you shall seek *the* place that the Lord your God will choose” (5) and that “only at *the* place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes—there you shall offer your burnt offerings and there you shall do everything I command you.”⁷

There is much literature on these matters, and I can not claim more than limited acquaintance with it. But I am drawn to it as I try to imagine the interpretative communities from which Cultee or other survivors came. Of course the strength of centers of authority and regulation was different. In communities of the Pacific Northwest each family might have recognized a different center. Denis Demert, a Tlingit educator, once remarked that the Tlingit knew there were different local versions of certain historical events, but that was not a problem until one version was written down, and as a result taken as the true one.

Yet forces for diversity have been strong in both. It is well known that the several canons, Jewish and Christian, have existed within a large field of other works also representing part of what some thought should be authoritative.

If one recognizes “revisionism” (cf. Brisman 1998) and “interpretation” (Kugel and Greer 1986; Kugel 1997) as “creativity,” then such creativity was in fact an ordinary feature of both kinds of community. All had stories considered central to how they came to be as they are, and to what might become of them, stories often instructive, sometimes amusing (Native Americans seem to have a considerable edge there), but in any case taken for granted as sources of orientation in the world. All experienced a need for renewal and reconciliation between stories and experience.

When Boas came to Bay Center, Washington, and met with Cultee, the only locus of myths in Kathlamet at the moment may have been in Cultee’s head. But certainly Cultee did not think of himself as author or source of any, but as someone for whom the enabling event of performance was still potentially possible, and for whom tradition was surely the enabling reference (to use terms of reference from Foley 1992). Despite his apparent day-to-day isolation, Cultee still was an embodiment of what Glassie has said folklore seeks to capture: “the relation of individual will to collective process” (1994:241); in sum, a nexus of the need to interpret and recreate a part of something not one’s own.

I would like to suggest three terms for what would occur when narrators like those in the Northwest, like those who transmitted Biblical tradition, wrestled with figures and events in thinking about and conveying a narrative. These are not learned or stylish terms, but terms akin to what Indian narrators themselves might have used:

- a) could have been
- b) should have been
- c) must have been

a) *Could have been*, of course, is part of bringing a story to life or close to home by reimagining its details, as much for some historians (Alter 1995:71 *et passim*) as for folk narrators. Indeed, when Hiram Smith tells “The News about Coyote,” having just heard Louis Simpson’s telling as taken down by Sapir a half-century before, there is no disagreement between the two as to what happened, and where: Coyote did perform fellatio on himself on the Washington side of the Columbia across from Mosier. The difference is in how it happened.

Simpson tells it as straightforward fact. Smith tells it with extenuating circumstances—the sun was hot, he was tired, he sat down, sitting, he became aroused, then.... The two openings correlate with the two endings. For Simpson, Coyote is refused food by people, not once but twice. Each time they say what he had done. For Smith, Coyote, hoping to keep the news from getting out, first creates the rimrock that runs down to the river there, but can’t prevent the news from getting out. Smith says that wherever he goes, Coyote hears the people saying the news, but quotes what they say only once. Simpson ends with Coyote admitting, “Truly now I am known.” Smith ends with Coyote going off and leaving, a conventional start of a new adventure (see Hymes 1996 for more).

Reading a recent title by two leaders in current questing for Jesus, Borg and Wright (1998), both of whom I respect, I cannot help thinking of a parallel for a study I might write: *The Meaning of Coyote: Two Visions*, by Hiram Smith and Louis Simpson.

The differences match other differences in treatment of Coyote’s character by the two men (see Hymes 1996). Perhaps “should have been” and “must have been” flow together here with “could have been.” But the starting point would seem to be something like this: given that it did happen (everyone knows the story), how did it happen? There is room for creativity in answering that—creativity grounded in how one has come to conceive that actor, what possibilities would be in character?

b) *Should have been* especially comes to mind when one finds a narrator wrestling with outcome. The Kathlamet Salmon myth has spring salmon, coming up river, endure insult from the plants along the river. “Without us,

your people would have died” (in winter). Telling the myth a second time to Boas a few years later, Cultee revised both form and ending so that the complementary ascendancy in winter of the female domain (plants instead of fish) is overcome forever (Hymes 1985).

Telling about the arrival of foods in spring to Melville Jacobs, Victoria Howard (in Clackamas) has some of the same formulaic words as Cultee, but turns a journey step by step upriver into appearance, one after the other, of plants and others. The tone is pedagogic entirely. There is an announcer who explains what each new thing is named and food for, probably a fish person (Jacobs reports), but as the end of the series approaches, Mrs. Howard breaks off. She has been treating each kind of food in sets of three. Now she is at the end of fish, and having treated sturgeon, has only salmon left as the culmination. But how can salmon be both announcer and announced? She breaks off, and says that her grandmother said that it was Coyote who provided for all the things good to eat. That seems “should have been” for sure. Salmon (a male hero par excellence) as ordainer of foods is dismissed for good.

c) *Must have been* is how I place Victoria Howard’s telling of “Seal and her younger brother lived there,” the first of her myths I interpreted thoroughly, and one which I still perform (Hymes 1968, 1977, 1981). I am moved by the daughter, the expressive heart of the telling. The telling has its origin in a story of revenge. On the Pacific Coast various versions are known of a plot in which a man (or two men) travel to another place to take revenge on its headman. To gain access, he disguises himself as a woman of the man’s house. He may be almost discovered several times. At night, when he climbs up to the man’s bed (still disguised as his wife), a young child calls out that he has a penis (or a knife), but is shushed. The “wife” goes uncaught, kills the man during the night, and escapes. All this to the satisfaction of the audience, presumably, the story having been told from the standpoint of the one who seeks revenge.

Among eastern Chinookans a version came to be known in which the child is a girl on whose face blood drips during the night. Victoria Howard told Melville Jacobs a version in which the entire story is told from the standpoint of that girl. She notices something odd about the “woman” who comes to her uncle and tries to warn, but is shushed. When at night something drips on her face, she tells her mother, but is told to shush. When she hears something dripping, she tells her mother, and is told again to shush. She gets up, raises a torch, and sees her uncle dead. She reproaches her mother. Her mother begins a formal lament. Again the girl reproaches and weeps. Until now the word “to say” has been transitive. Now the word “to say” is intransitive. The two women no longer address each other.

In his useful account of canonical interpretation (taking the Bible as a whole), Sanders uses the term *dynamic analogy* for “re-presenting the tradition, consciously identifying with the character or characters in the tradition most *representative* of the new hearers or readers” (1984:70–71).

Surely this is how we come to have what Mrs. Howard said. The “wife” and the husband slain in revenge are little more than props. All the dialogue is between the two women. And it is the girl who speaks last, to the audience, if not to her mother, in the place Chinookan myths provide for final evaluations. To account for the telling one must infer that someone, perhaps the mother-in-law from whom she heard the story, perhaps Mrs. Howard, asked herself, what was it like for that child?

The three attitudes may be difficult to distinguish, may overlap. All three may come together in Cultee’s envisioning of the destruction of his people, transforming a plot with the Sun as hostile father-in-law to be able to say so. To dramatize what might have been, then what became, was to keep the people still heroes of their own story, though tragic heroes, brought low by hybris of one of their own. It is hard to understand the existence of the story except in such terms. It is hard to account for it except as a creative act, true to the tradition, new to the tradition.⁸

What I suggest is that the three attitudes make sense of continuing recreation and creativity conducted in good faith. Recognition of narratives as traditionally organized throughout (*durchcomponiert*), sometimes in telling details, gives further confidence. Such texts, though taken down at or near the end of a tradition, are not merely remembered, much less haltingly so. Louis Simpson’s “The Deserted Boy,” for example, as told to Sapir, in its middle act is a bravura display of identification with the guardian-spirit quest that it in effect becomes (see Hymes 1994).

In these cases, then, we are dealing with minds which tradition continued to inhabit, for whom a tradition continued to be “good to think.” They were sustained in this by command of a tradition’s technical resources of form.

Oral, Aural, and Anal

How can this be, some might seem to say. Karl Kroeber has recently written, “Because the Trickster story is oral, it exists solely in terms of its affects [sic] on a participating audience” (1998:233). Others have depreciated texts which exist only in writing in other ways. I hope to have shown, in relation to Cultee’s “Sun’s Nature” and other texts, that such an attitude dismisses verbal art of value. It turns its back on materials of importance to those whose heritage they are. And it ignores that analysis of the form of such texts is possible, and can “liberate” them. (On this, see the final chapter

of Chappell and Bringhurst (forthcoming)). Whether or not Cultee told the “Sun’s Nature” to anyone before telling it to Boas, it would be ludicrous to suppose that until then it did not exist, being only in his mind. And did not exist in terms of its effect on Cultee himself.⁹

If we are to adequately respect and understand such narratives, we must think in terms of thoughtful, motivated minds, seeking narrative adequate to their experience, surviving and renewing.

My turning away here from speech events may seem surprising, given my effort to develop ethnography of speaking. Texts, I know, force me to it. And respect. Again and again people whom some whites would have seen only as impoverished and uneducated, have been found to be creative and articulate. To have rich minds, minds both retaining stories and continuing to think them.

To say that stories exist only in performance is to say that between performances narrators do not think. That they are prisoners of presence of an audience. That they go about in their daily lives, encountering nothing that makes them remember a story. Or think of how a story might or ought to have gone. That the stories they know never pose them problems, from perceived incompleteness to contradictions, with one another or with their own experience. That in short, they have very limited minds. We should be embarrassed to denigrate them so. To do so seems to me intellectually constipated.

The same is true of views that only what can be heard (and perhaps seen) through recordings is worth attention. All this adds a final *coup de grace* to the destruction of tradition through disease, disruption, and war.

Moreover, as we come to understand more clearly that the stories are not prose, not paragraphs, but lines, organizations of lines, we can recapture something of the actual artistry and creativity of the originals (cf. Hymes 1994, 1998a, b, 1999; Bringhurst 1999), and on occasion, given respect and understanding, speak them again.

A start has been made, but only a start. We are not yet able, for example, to speak with confidence about the perspective and style of any one narrator, grounding what is said in terms of that narrator’s own language, and the kinds of organization we can assume to be present. Nor can we compare and contrast the styles of different narrators, and different traditions, in such a way. That can only be done when all of a body of narratives has been analyzed ethnopoetically. Even if materials are limited, as for many traditions, there is much that can be learned.

Herder, Chomsky and others

What can be learned, indeed, speaks to an old tradition of our own, associated with such names as Herder. It is a tradition which sees languages and cultures as at least in part a result of creativity on the part of those who share them. Anyone who has taken delight in the particulars and patterns of another language will have a sense of this.

A dominant force in contemporary study of language and mind, to be sure, dismisses such delight:

The primary one [task at hand] is to show that the apparent richness and diversity of linguistic phenomena is illusory and epiphenomenal, the result of interaction of fixed principles under slightly varying conditions. (Chomsky 1995:8)

A different view would welcome establishment of fixed principles in the organization of verbal art (such as may prove true in ethnopoetics), but see such principles, not as an end in themselves, but as an aid in discovering richness and diversity. Those of us who have such a view welcome such evidence of community and personal creativity. I happen to be reading a book that delves deeply into what can still be seen of the Appalachian world the Cherokee once knew. One part recounts the return of peregrine falcons. Let me end with two quotations, taking them as analogous to narratives whose form we do not yet know:

when I stop here, to savor an old edge of the Cherokee country, I watch the sky bordered by this table mountain pine and replay the flight of falcons in my mind as I know it to be, a sight I could not have imagined if I had not seen it, no more than I could have imagined red wolves or a rock-loving pine that needed fire. (Camuto 1997:318)

Earlier, watching birds but recently released:

After they learn to hitch rides of midday thermals, which take them to new heights and load their wings with possibilities the vultures and ravens cannot imagine, they begin to exercise the freedom of their wildness and create a fabulous order in the air no one would have imagined without them. (315)

Notes

1 I broached some of the thoughts in this essay in a letter to Glassie (9 January 1996).

2 I give the rest of the myth in its poetic form, as lines and groups of lines, so as to be able to comment on form later.

3 In the 1970s the typographer and poet Charles Bigelow and I talked with Hiram Smith, one of the last fluent speakers of Wasco Chinook, about an account he told us of the demise of real Indian doctors (with spirit power). The powers they had gathered at the coast and held a contest as to which was strongest, and the strongest killed off the others. Chuck mentioned such factors as white domination, missionaries, compulsory schooling, and the like. Hiram acknowledged them. But there was also an account in terms of native forces alone.

4 Both Trafzer and Hines reproduce a story told on June 7, 1926 to Lucullus McWhorter by Owl Child, and likely learned by him from his wife. At least he says he doesn't know the details of the ending and will ask her. (See notes in each book). One does not have to accept every interpretation offered by Lévi-Strauss to realize that his principle of transformational relationships, and his unparalleled scouring of the literature of New World mythology, are lasting contributions.

5 Note that Chinookans on the eastern side of the Cascades did not suffer nearly as much from introduced disease as those to the west.

6 See Graves and Patai (1966), ch. 10, "Adam's Helpmeets."

7 I quote the New Revised Standard Version from *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (Meeks et al., 1989). This anticipation of Jerusalem is an example of revision in terms of "what should be" ((b) above).

8 In his valuable account of dynamics of canonical interpretation (the Bible being taken as a whole) Sanders (1986:70) distinguishes two basic hermeneutic axioms, constitutive and prophetic. The first emphasizes God saving and comforting his people, the second God judging them. Certainly "Sun's Nature" is prophetic, warning and making possible (the axe) destruction. The final verses in which the Sun is shown as *still continuing and in charge*, seem constitutive, an image of an ultimate order not destroyed.

9 Let me note that Kroeber's book is valuable, and I am glad to find that he has included a study of my own. As to imagination as distinct from performance, let me quote the stage director Herbert Blau, in the course of a marvelously rich account of the difficulty of encompassing *King Lear*:

In the years I have spent in the theater (nearly forty) I directed a lot of plays, but have always had a tendency to believe that a staging in the mind (like that by Edgar on the cliffs of Dover) can exceed by far anything realizable on stage, which is why I tell my students—contrary to established pedagogy in dramatic literature—that, no, it is not necessary to go to the theatre to really see the play; that, in fact, seeing a performance there, even if it is brilliantly acted, especially if it is brilliantly acted (however you determine that), often gets in the way of imagining it for yourself, though to do so with *Lear*... will if you see it cut to the brain. (1998:269)

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