

“UNDERSTANDING NATIVE AMERICAN TRICKSTER TALES”

Arnold Krupat
Sarah Lawrence College

The stories Western critics have called trickster tales are set in the age of myth, a long, long time ago, when the earth was new and still *soft*, not yet hardened into its present shapes and forms, neither physically nor culturally the way we find it now. It is in the age of myth that trickster *transforms* the world into something like its present state or condition. Thinking about a world without fire, many oral cultures told stories about how it was trickster who obtained fire for mankind. Thinking about a world before death, other storytellers told how trickster accidentally or intentionally brought it about that humans must die. It was trickster as well who fixed the number of fingers we would have on our hands, or determined what rules should be observed in hunting and fishing, as he also established incest taboos. In short, it was trickster, as many commentators have noted, who founded much of what all peoples know as culture.

But trickster is also the violator of every known cultural convention, in a great many tales doing exactly what every good Navajo or Spokane or Coeur d’Alene person should not do, and, further, erring in outrageously bawdy and excessive fashion. As the anthropologist Paul Radin, one of the earliest and most diligent Western students of trickster tales wrote a good many years ago, the

twofold function of benefactor and buffoon...

is the outstanding characteristic of the overwhelming majority of trickster heroes wherever they are encountered in aboriginal America.

It's this combination of "benefactor and buffoon," in Radin's phrase, that has especially puzzled Western commentators, and seemed to be in need of "mediation," or certainly resolution, reconciliation of some sort. But perhaps I have gotten ahead of myself.

*

Let me note, therefore, that the term trickster was first used by Daniel G. Brinton in the second half of the nineteenth century to describe a character who appears in the oral narratives of most of the Native nations of North America. There is no equivalent generic term for trickster in the languages of these nations. Rather, these peoples all give the figure *we* call trickster a specific, concrete name. In California, Oregon, the inland plateau, the Great Basin, the southern Plains, and the southwest, the trickster is most commonly called Coyote. In the southeast, the trickster is Rabbit or Hare; Raven or Crow in the Arctic and sub-Arctic; Jay or Wolverine in parts of Canada. Among the Lakota, the trickster is Iktomi or Ikto, a word translated as spider. Among the Winnebago, the trickster is called Wakjankaga, although Hare (Wacdjungega) is also a Winnebago trickster. For the Anishinaabe or Chippewa, the trickster is Nenabos, or Manabozho in a number of variant pronunciations and spellings. For the Gros Ventre, Nixant is the trickster's name, as it is Veeho for the Cheyenne, Sitconski for the Assiniboine, Napi for the Blackfeet, and Istinike for the Ponca. In the Northeast we find Gluskap or Gluskabe. Among the Cree peoples of Canada, the trickster is known as Wesucechak, or Wisahketchahk, anglicized to Whiskey Jack. And there are still more names for tricksters or trickster-like figures.

On the one hand, as already indicated, tricksters behave in grotesque and anti-social fashion. As his—although there are some female tricksters, tricksters are, for the most part, male—his name would indicate, trickster engages in gluttonous, and extraordinarily obscene behaviors, copulating with his daughter, daughter-in-law, or mother-in-law, sometimes sending his enormous penis (on occasion he carries it in a box) swimming across rivers in search of

sexual adventure. He excretes and asks his shit for advice, or, if in the mood, performs oral sex on himself. He sets fire to his anus as a punishment for not obeying his instructions to guard his food supply while he sleeps. He is selfish, amoral, foolish, and often destructive; again and again, as I have said, he does things every upstanding Hochank or Lakota or Apache person should not do. Yet he usually emerges more or less unscathed by his actions and his actions are almost always experienced as funny.

Such a figure is by no means unknown to the West. I am thinking of Gargantua and Pantagruel behaving in ways that have given us the adjective *rabelaisian* as well as the later Bakhtinian notion of carnival. The French also have sly Renard the fox, the Spanish, Gil Blas and Lazarillo de Tormes, the Germans Till Eulenspiegel, and Scandinavian peoples, Loki. Although it was indeed Prometheus who stole fire for the ancient Greeks, it is more nearly Hermes who approximated, for them, a trickster. So if trickster were only bawdy and sly, that should not have been a problem for Western critics.

But as I have noted, trickster is also a transformer with very special powers and abilities which turn the world—which transform it—into what we now know it to be. Stories about Wakjankaga among the Winnebago were classed among the *waikan*, what-is-sacred, for Wakjankaga is not only “the Foolish One,” but Kunuga, first son of Ma’una, the Earthmaker, sent to earth by his Father to chastise or destroy monsters who would be harmful to the human beings who would soon people this earth. Iktomi, the Sioux “Imp of Mischief,” (LBR 39) invented language,” (106) named the animals, and “discovered colors.” (107) I’ve mentioned earlier some of the other elements of human culture established by trickster. So we have a character who does everything wrong, stumbling and bumbling, cheating and lying and fornicating—and as well a character who is so potentially powerful, sacred, even, that stories about him are to be told only in the winter when the earth is asleep, or at least when snakes are not above ground.

It seems to be the case, as Karl Kroeber has noted, that “...the Trickster’s ‘transforming’ qualities...tend to drop away in agriculturally based societies [where] he becomes more purely a buffoonish figure of fun.” But in hunting and gathering cultures his transformative powers remain, so that—I emphasize this once more--the bawdy, comic, foolish, bumbling trickster is also sacred, awesome, or dangerous. It has been this combination of trickster and transformer, culture hero and cultural marplot, taboo maker and taboo breaker, champion of mankind and predator that has proved difficult for critics and scholars to comprehend.

Daniel Brinton who gave trickster his generic, English name was also one of the first to try to attempt to resolve the problem of how it could be that trickster was both a mischief-maker and taboo-breaker as well as a godlike transformer. Brinton came to the conclusion that trickster was a degenerated version of an earlier culture hero of myth—not a single figure with the double nature we have discussed, but, rather, the odd sum of two figures, an earlier and a later. Franz Boas, founder, as it were, of American scientific, university-based, professional anthropology, near the close of the nineteenth century, weighed in with a different solution to the double nature of the trickster. Boas, in effect, simply explained away trickster’s transformative powers. Boas wrote that

I find that in most tales of the transformer
or of the culture hero, the prime motive is...a
purely egotistical one, and that the changes
which actually benefit mankind are only in-
cidentally beneficial. They are primarily de-
signed by the transformer to reach his own
selfish ends.

Boas continues, “With this conception of the so-called culture hero the difficulty disappears of uniting in one person the benevolent being and the trickster.”

Paul Radin, Boas’ student and the first to receive an academic doctorate in the new discipline of anthropology in the U.S., obtained a lengthy series of tales about the Winnebago trickster, Wakjankaga, from a consultant named Sam Blowsnake in 1912. Radin weighed in on the subject in a manner that reversed Brinton’s degeneration theory, for it was Radin’s contention that trickster was not at all a relatively new figure of myth, but, rather, that he represented a very ancient stratum of mythological material. Trickster, Radin wrote in his important volume, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956) is the “oldest of all figures in American Indian mythology, probably in all mythologies.” In regard to the paradoxical and unsettling nature of the trickster’s bawdy misbehavior conjoined to his godlike capacities, Radin confirmed Boas’ view, concluding that “Trickster’s divinity is always secondary and...it is largely a construction of the priest-thinker, of a remodeller” of older material.

In the 1950s, the world-renowned French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss also took on the trickster. In an essay, called “The Structural Study of Myth,” Levi-Strauss first claims that, contrary to popular belief, myth and poetry are not at all similar, but entirely different. Why? Because, while poetry is always in some measure untranslatable—something always gets lost in translation—myth, Levi-Strauss insists, is always fully translatable. No matter what culture it comes from, no matter what sort of story it tells, “the mythical value of the myth” wrote Levi-Strauss, “remains preserved, even through the worst translation.” The “mythical value of the myth” is never in the details themselves (and Levi-Strauss had absolutely no interest in the performance dimension of oral stories) but, rather, in an abstraction from the details, one that arranged thematic elements to show that myth—I’m quoting Levi-Strauss--“always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation...two opposite terms with no

intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which allow a third one as mediator.” Asking himself, “Why is it that throughout North America [the part of trickster] is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven?” Levi-Strauss answers that it is because both are carrion-eating animals, and carrion-eating animals are mediators between prey animals and herbivorous animals. Like the first, they do eat animal food, but like the second, they do not kill what they eat.

Now, as we have seen, there are many more trickster figures than Coyote and Raven, and, too, Coyote, in empirical fact (as well as in the stories) is not usually a carrion eater. But, as Michael Carroll writes in the ‘70’s, the factual errors don’t really matter, and Levi-Strauss is nonetheless correct in his insistence that what myth does is

to openly express a dilemma in such a way
as to provide some sort of cognitive model
that allows the individual to lose sight of
the inherent contradiction that the dilemma
entails.

Carroll agrees that myth mediates oppositions, and that trickster is a mediating figure. There have been other solutions to the trickster mystery, as it were, but I haven’t time to outline them here. Rather, what I will try to do is to follow up on a suggestion made by only a few scholars, the possibility that our difficulties with trickster stories has less to do with indigenous types of myth narratives than with Western categories of thought. In the time remaining, I want to argue that it is indeed the poor fit between our dualistic and oppositional epistemology and an indigenous epistemology that does not construct dualities oppositionally that has made trickster a problem.

At least since Aristotle, Western philosophical thought has proceeded by means of an exclusionary, dualistic logic of oppositions; something is A or not-A, a 1 is not a 0 nor is a 0 a 1. Factoring in the Hebraic dimension of these matters, at least since the time the Ten Commandments were transcribed in writing, we have known that thou shalt or thou shalt not: there are no two ways about it. Certain texts became canonical, others were adjudged apocryphal. You can read the apocryphal texts--but not in your Bible. The curious amalgam of Hebraic and Hellenistic materials that we take as the foundation of Western thought—obviously I am giving only the sketchiest of accounts—has been persistently a matter of either/or rather than both/and.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that confronted with a figure who was *both* godlike *and* indecent, a shaper of the world *and* a seducer, the first gesture of Western critical thought would be to attempt to *resolve* the tension by deciding that this both/and character must really be one or the other. Thus, as we have seen, for Brinton, trickster wasn't properly a narrative personage in his own right, but, rather, a degenerated version of a nobler figure of an earlier time, the culture hero. For Boas, and Radin, trickster was basically a selfish, infantile, egoist; it was only later shamanic influence that grafted transformative powers on to this figure. These efforts to resolve matters on an either/or basis continue in an extreme version in Levi-Straus who, believing that *all* thought—not just post-Aristotelean Western thought--proceeds by means of binary oppositions, takes the function of myth to consist precisely in its capacity to *mediate*, at least apparently to mediate, between these contradictory values. All of this is very interesting—but, as I have said, it is more interesting as an illustration of the ways in which Western thought engages its Others, than as an account of what is going on in trickster tales.

*

Let's turn for a moment now to what traditional Native tellers of trickster tales have themselves had to say about these matters. I am aware of only a very few narrators who have

been willing to discuss the stories they told and thus to engage in some metanarrative of their own, and any generalizations I can tentatively offer, let me acknowledge, are based on this small sampling only. For our purposes today, I'm going to turn to Felix White, Sr. and Hugh Yellowman, both of whom I have mentioned earlier, with some reference to George Wasson. A fuller version of this paper augments the remarks of these storytellers with those of several others.

Men who valued trickster tales and kept them alive among their own people, Mr. White, Mr. Yellowman, and Mr. Wasson also discussed them with Kathleen Danker and Barre Toelken, and allowed them to publish some of their comments. These comments, I believe, reveal that their commitment to telling stories about Wakjankaga or Coyote is an extraordinarily ingenious, rich, and sophisticated way of "doing" philosophy orally. I use the word philosophy here, broadly to mean an inquiry into human nature, human culture, and human knowledge. In particular, the philosophical inquiry I see at work here is concerned with the tension between the cultural conventions that regulate our lives as social beings, and the possibilities inherent in our lives as individual human agents. Just as origin myths in all cultures tell people who they are by telling them where they come from, so, too, may trickster stories tell people who they are by exploring the interaction—I have specifically *not* said contradiction or opposition—by exploring the interaction between the potentialities of human nature and the requirements, the necessary restrictions of human culture.

*

Felix White, Sr., narrated a series of Winnebago trickster tales concerning that same Wakjankaga who appeared in the cycle published by Paul Radin to Kathleen Danker, who recorded and transcribed his narratives "The story character," Mr. White told Danker, "he does so many unthought of things in there that it causes the listener to start thinking, 'Why does he do

that?’ It’s a process of making somebody exercise his mind to think.” Trickster, Mr. White speculates, “was a person that had a mind of his own, and you might say that he could be disobedient.” Compare the words of Hugh Yellowman as he responds to Barre Toelken’s question, Why tell Coyote stories to children? Yellowman responds, “‘If my children hear [the stories], they will grow up to be good people; if they don’t hear them, they will turn out to be bad’.” Why tell them to adults? Because, answers Yellowman, “Through the stories everything is made possible....If [Coyote] did not do all those things, then those things would not be possible in the world.”

Mr. White’s comments indicate that trickster stories urge meditation on the reasons for particular behaviors. Why does Wakjankaga, the Foolish One, do that? A good deal of the time, it would seem that trickster does what he does because his nature—maybe part human, part animal, part divine--makes doing that possible, at least do-able. This also seems consistent with Mr. Yellowman’s comments. The children will learn to be good people by learning that a great many of Coyote’s behaviors violate Navajo norms; good people, good Navajos, that is to say, know not to violate these cultural and societal norms. Thus Coyote’s behavior teaches by negative example. And yet Coyote’s complex nature—human, animal, and divine, as I have said—potentially goes well beyond what culture and society allow. However culturally and socially good we should be, we are the sorts of creatures who want to know what is “possible” not merely allowable in the world. As Mr. White told Danker, Wakjankaga “goes through everything—everything a human can do or has potential to do.”

Even the few comments I have cited may help us rethink the apparent contradiction between trickster’s outrageous obscenities and his transformative sacrality or divinity. Trickster goes back a long time—maybe eighteen thousand years or more, if an image found in the caves at Trois Freres in France is indeed that of a trickster—and he has survived into the present.

Trickster, it would therefore seem, is a figure deeply important to the collective and individual understanding of those who tell about him and those who listen to stories about him. Trickster's adventures, as Barre Toelken notes, "show us not tricks but colorful dramas that create vicarious experiences in specific matters which are important to us but in which we normally cannot, or should not have personal experience." But until fairly recently, trickster's adventures have been badly translated, and, contrary to Levi-Straus, it appears that a very great deal *has* been lost in translation. The consistent application, in John Miles Foley's words, of "an external frame of reference"—in particular, of a Western, oppositional frame of reference—"may actively deform the reality of the experience" the stories seek to convey. It is important for those of us who have not grown up hearing trickster tales—and this increasingly includes many Native American people as well as non-Native people—to listen closely because, as Karl Kroeber has wisely written, these stories "offer[...] unique insights into the sources of unfamiliar modes of human imagining." For those fortunate enough to live in communities where these tales are still told, the stories provide, as Barre Toelken notes in relation to his work with George Wasson,

culturally enjoyable correlatives to a body of
thought so complicated and profound that
vicarious experience in it through entertainment
is one of the only access points available to most
people.

Storytellers who specialize in trickster tales are engaging in both/and rather than either/or modes of doing philosophy, instantiating a complicated and profound body of thought through modes of human imagining and thinking that are still unfamiliar to Western critics. In its holism, or at least its non-oppositionalism, these modes of imagining and thinking, as I have said, have been problematic for Western thinkers. Both/and logics have for long threatened the Aristotelean

logic of either/or, A or not-A. Tribal storytellers who specialize in tales of the culture hero—we may say--might well be people predominantly interested in the positive or heroic potentialities of behavior, animal, human, divine.

But storytellers who have specialized in trickster tales have been interested in something different, and, for the West, something more difficult. Barre Toelken, in his work with the Coquella storyteller, George Wasson, catches this quite well, I think, when he notes that trickster stories for their narrators are not at all oppositional, for they insist that “good and evil, sacred and secular, smart and dumb, are not mutually exclusive qualities, but are overlapping, interdependent aspects of each other.” Western critics and scholars might have learned this from Hegelian or Marxian dialectic; more recently, we may have learned it from the post-structuralist, specifically Derridean critique of logocentrism.

The double-sided, both/and mode of trickster stories, as I have tried to show, has for long been responded to by Western critics as a problem. And this problem has been responded to by means of the trope of irony. Irony is our trope for dealing with both/and representations where the norm is either/or; irony signals a crisis for Western logic. At the level of high canonical culture, for example, *Oedipus the King* requires us to believe that Oedipus’ fate has been decreed by the gods, and it also requires us to believe that Oedipus is himself responsible for his fate. Accepting that responsibility and punishing himself for what was fated by the gods makes Oedipus a tragic hero. How ironic! we say.

But if I have understood Felix White, Hugh Yellowman, and George Wasson at all, for them there is no tension or opposition in the trickster stories they tell between sacred and secular, good and evil, benefactor and buffoon, and the like. The more we meditate on each term or perspective, the more we find each requires the other term or perspective--and this provokes no crisis. Of course we can often say, This is not right, or That is a good thing. But occasions will

most certainly arise when wrong and right complexly intersect, and, for the narrators of trickster tales, these occasions are not, at all ironic in the Western sense; rather, for them, this is just the way things are. How can something be both good and bad? How can it not? So of course trickster is a benefactor and a buffoon; of course he establishes the taboos and breaks every one of them. He makes the cultural rules that will limit our human potentiality, and he also acts to extend human potentiality because, while we must obey the rules to live in society, we have to know of possibilities beyond what the rules allow.

Now that we are in a postmodern, post-structuralist, globalized age that is moving to post-literacy, it may well come to be the case that the both/and mode of thinking may come to appear, as I have said, not so much ironic as a normative way to understand the world. *If* something like this is happening, it should not, then, surprise us to find our post-structuralist, postmodern, nearly postliterate age extremely interested in the trickster stories, for it is just the sort of unfixing of stable terms and oppositions that trickster stories, more than any other narratives, has for long performed. In regard to this renewed interest, I have time only to tell you that I am in the distinct minority of those who believe contemporary tricksters and the tricksters of traditional oral narrative do not have very much in common, at least in the way they *function* for their audiences. I will simply state, with no time to argue the matter, that the claims for the ironic nature of the oral trickster are postmodern back-projections onto a pre-modern worldview.

Some years back when the linguist, William Bright was putting together a collection of Coyote stories, he wrote to the poet, Peter Blue Cloud, asking him if he had any poems about the mythical Coyote. Blue Cloud sent back a postcard that read, You sure Coyote's a myth? As Felix White would say, that can exercise your mind to think.