How Long Does "Mythification" Take?
Thoughts on a Lushootseed Story about a Disabled Boy

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"The imaginative construction of personhood is the best, and perhaps the only kind of life, as N. Scott Momaday suggests when he writes that 'an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself.'"
Paula Gunn Allen

"The Boy Who Could Not Walk" is the kind of story that tempts us to believe that we can see behind it the record of something that actually did happen somewhere in this world to a real person who had something wrong with his legs. Whether as a result of "overhearing" his mother's thoughts about him, as in the version Sauk-Suiattle storyteller Emma Conrad told to Thom Hess in the 1960s, or as a result of overt family quarreling about him, as in the version told by Upper Skagit storyteller Susan Sampson Peter to Leon Metcalf in the 1950s, the young man, in emotional and spiritual distress, finds himself alone in the woods. He crawls, swims and camps until he arrives at a mountain (in Mrs. Conrad's version) or a cedar grove by a lake (in Mrs. Peter's version). Mrs. Conrad seems to imply that the mountain has been the young man's destination all along, while Mrs. Peter's young man is just looking for an out-of-the-way place to die. Though from this point on the two stories become increasingly dissimilar to each other, they each narrate the curing of the boy, who receives spirit power and returns home to feed the people.

"The Boy Who Could Not Walk" is not a syeyehub like a "Starchild" or a Changer story, for it is set neither in the myth time nor during the time of the Change, and the protagonist is just a human being. Nor is it a historical text like a memoir, because the period in which it is set, "long ago," is a time outside the scope of the individual storyteller's memory and indeed seems to antedate the limits of family tradition, for the characters have no names. (It should be pointed out here that Mrs. Peter identifies the father of her disabled boy as "an ancestor of Harry Moses," but, judging by the sound of the tape, she is joking.) Both Mrs. Conrad and Mrs. Peter locate their story in the Upper Skagit-Sauk River region, though they use different place names; and storytellers from other regions who tell their own versions locate it within their own territories (e.g., Smith 1940:71; Haeberlin and Gunther 1930:74). Though it may seem, then, to audience members at a telling of this tale that they can see a real incident through the screen of story, the distribution of the tale and the varying specificity of its locales seems to demonstrate that this vision is illusion.

Mrs. Peter's version of this story shows many characteristics of her particular artistry: family dynamics continually ruffle the narrative surface, old women play a prominent part, point of view means visual angles as well as opinions, and great attention is paid to placenames, clothing, technological procedures and good manners. Her story runs some 400 lines, as compared to Mrs. Conrad's 240. But despite its comparative brevity, Mrs. Conrad's story includes something that Mrs. Peter's leaves out: a detailed account of the curing of the young man. As Mrs. Conrad tells it, servants announce to the spirit power who lives on the mountain that an Indian person has arrived. The spirit power sends his servants out to

examine the boy, but they report back that he still has food inside him. After a month they are able to report that he is now clean. It is then ordered that he be brought inside, where his disability is massaged away and he is given gifts.

Some time in the 1940s, Jackson Harvey, a Skagit elder living on the Sauk River, the region in which Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Conrad place this story, told anthropologist June Collins about sending his son out to fast in preparation for a spirit-power quest. One spirit that people could recieve, he said, lived in a longhouse under water. The person questing for this spirit would tie a rope around his waist with a rock at one end and then jump from a raft into deep water:

> He doesn't hang on to the rock but on to the rope. Grass grows about ten feet high on the bottom of the lake. He doesn't land on the bottom. The rock hits the house. He is awake until he hits the house; then he becomes unconscious. The chief of the house sends his hired man out to ask who is coming.
>
> "Indian is here."
> "Is he clean? Does he have food in him yet?"
> "He is clean."
> "Bring him in the house."
> (Collins 1974:177)

The parallels between this information and the plot of Mrs. Conrad's version are obvious, and they raise for non-Indian readers the question of what might be the difference between legend and history. Mr. Harvey's information is given as fact, and Mrs. Conrad's story shows that such fact might be used without change in a legend. Unlike Mr. Harvey, however, Mrs. Conrad nowhere prefaces her narrative with any statement that this is what could happen or did happen on a spirit quest; in fact, she never says in so many worlds that the boy went on a quest at all. (Mrs. Peter, in claiming that her young protagonist is only looking for a place to die, is even further from an overt statement about a quest and may in fact be thinking of occasions in which spirit power comes unbidden to people who are grieving.) The Lushootseed audience for Mrs. Conrad's story would know that when the boy in his sadness goes away by himself, he is replicating a situation that includes several components of the quest (solitude, physical and emotional or mental stress); and when the man in the house sends out a servant to report on who has arrived, the audience would know that the boy has found a certain spirit helper. The progress of the boy's purification also hints at purposeful discipline of a quest-related kind. Perhaps one difference between "information" and "legend" is that a storyteller leaves this sort of generic information for the audience to supply.

At any rate, "fact" such as Jackson Harvey gave to June Collins is treated by those who pass it on in ethnographies as "fact" -- it is passed on without comment as to its possible relation to "reality." But when the same fact appears within the context of a story, then it is held by ethnographers to be fantasy. In Euroamerican society, fiction, if it is serious, is believed to contain truth whether the plot is made up or not; but for non-Indians looking at Indian narrative art, the presence of the indicators of artifice -- the figures of repetition, the drama of the narration -- seems to disable belief in the kinds of truth told through story. This disability may be seen as underlying the very notion of "mythification."

The production of myth (syeyehub) is seen by many scholars as a process which takes narratives of real events as its raw material, and legend is often considered to be a form intermediate between historical narrative and myth. In the late 1950s, Sally Snyder assembled a collection of stories from Skagit elders to use as the basis of what she called an "ethnofolkloristic" study of Skagit society (Snyder 1964). In her study of the literature, which incorporates many of the ideas of Melville Jacobs, Snyder sets forth a model for the production of syeyehub: true stories -- citations of outlandish experiences or unusual events set in the historical present and told anecdotally -- gradually became stylized (more formal and laconic) in narration; the characters were mythified (identified with their own spirit powers) and the incidents were treated symbolically (seen as carrying meaning for society as a whole) (1964:26-50). We can almost see quotation marks around "true" as true story is equated with "outlandish experience" (Snyder's term).

Snyder seems to be describing a process in which an event of specific interest is thought about until it becomes part of a work of art which comments on the whole human condition. In Euroamerican tradition, as well, author's prefaces to their books often speak of such a process, and this may be called by critics, but in a glamorizing way, "mythmaking". Literary biographers may even perform euhemeristic operations on fictions, but these are seen as adding to a store of knowledge about a work, not as invalidating it. In modern Euroamerican literary culture, as in Hellenistic [Veyne 1943 (1988):46], such reduction of fiction to history is seen as of interest to a scholarly few. But at the same time, the few share with the work's larger public a sense of its worth as art (and therefore truth).

Snyder goes on to say: "...I suggest that the best of the Historical Era tales of wide circulation and repeated narration became mythicized by piecemeal artistry in the hands of many raconteurs and critical audiences over many generations" (1964:31). Implicit in Snyder's formulation are two ideas. The first is that no one storyteller has complete control over the artistic quality -- or more speifically the mythical element -- of the work. Against that notion one may attest for Mrs. Peter's version the fact that to anyone who knows her work, "The Boy Who Could Not Walk" on Leon Metcalf's tape recording is instantly recognizable as typical of her storytelling. As for Mrs. Conrad, who was not such an idiosyncratic narrator, we may at least defend her version against the charge of piecemeal artistry: appended to this paper is a schematic analysis of her story showing its thoroughgoing figuration; whether the figuration is Mrs. Conrad's own achievement or whether she is just passing it along, it is nothing piecemeal.

The second idea implicit in Snyder's formulation is the notion that myth does not exist until the facts have been forgotten. This notion is widespread. In his essay "Simon Fraser's Canoe; or, Capsizing into Myth" (Ramsey 1983), Jarold Ramsey traces the progress of a narrative from historical account through two increasingly mythified versions. All three accounts were collected by James Teit within the same decade (cf. Maud 1982:63-76) and possibly within a shorter timespan than that. The incident, the capsizing of a canoe, upon which the narratives are based occurred approximately 90 years before they were collected. Ramsey suggests that in order for the transformation from documentary account to myth to have taken place, several narrators and the passage of time must have played a part: "I am convinced ... that the really memorable myth texts from Western Indian cultures have gotten much of their imaginative power and resonance from individuals ... But if this is so, and if there is in fact a significant element of conscious individual artistry in myth,

then it must be admitted that such artistry may have figured late in the history of a given myth, in terms of idiosyncratic tellings, rather than at the beginning" (1983:121). We see that while the raconteur retreats in Snyder's model as time goes by, in Ramsey's the raconteur advances.

But one of the interesting things about Ramsey's examples is that the timetable turns out to be invalid: the historical account was still being told almost one hundred years after the event; it had become part of the family tradition of the woman who witnessed the capsizing. The two myth versions were being told contemporaneously with the historical account, and these versions, current with each other, display different degrees of mythification.

At this point, it is instructive to refer to a pair of documents published in Boas' works on the Kwakiutl: George Hunt's memoir "I desired to learn the ways of the shamans" (Boas 1930:1-41) and a version by Hunt of a portion of the same memoir given twenty-five years earlier (Boas 1966:121-123). (I use the terms "Kwakiutl" and "shaman" to replicate the practice of Boas and Hunt.) The difference between the two accounts can be illustrated by one example. In the version published in 1930 (the later version), Hunt tells about Made-to-be-Foolish, whose task was to spy on sick people, find out their symptoms and then to report this information secretly to a certain group of shamans. The shamans would then claim to have learned the information through dreams. The title of the position held by Made-to-be-Foolish was "dreamer," and the group of shamans he worked with claimed to have as their supernatural instructor the killer whale.

Here is part of Hunt's account of an experience he had as a novice shaman:

> Now I was walking along late at night, when I saw a small canoe coming to the beach and a single man in it. I went down to the beach to meet him for he was just sitting still in his small canoe as though he hesitated whether he should come ashore or not. Then I went up to him. Behold, who should it be but Made-to-be-Foolish, the dreamer of the shamans ... As soon as he recognized me he spoke to me secretly. He said, " ... Now I only wish to come and tell you about Chief Calumniated ..., for now he is very ill and they have already made his grave box. I mean that you may dream this night about what I told, and that you tell your dream in the morning," said he.
>
> (Boas 1930:14)

In an earlier version, Hunt tells it this way:

> That night I went aboard the canoe, and when I was asleep, the Killer Whale man appeared ... and said, "Friend Calumniated at Fort Rupert is sick. Go there! He has many enemies who wish his death. We shall accompany you." Then he transformed himself into a killer whale, blew once, and swam away. When he was blowing, foam came out of his blowhole. Then I heard a voice which said, "Rub this foam four times over your body. It has supernatural power." ... When I awoke, I weighed anchor and started for Fort Rupert. Many killer whales accompanied my

canoe.

(Boas 1966:122-123)

How could George Hunt have given two such dissimilar versions of the same event? Did he lose his faith in the ancestral religion of his people between the first and second tellings? It is clear that even before his experience as a novice shaman Hunt had doubts about the bona fides of many practitioners (Boas 1930:5). During the quarter century during which he talked to Boas about shamanism, Hunt's attitudes vacillated between belief and cynicism (Boas 1966:123-125); but in the course of the most cynical version of these events that he gave, Hunt states his belief in the genuineness of some, though not all, practitioners (Boas 1930:13; 40-41). Boas, speculating about what may have prompted the differences between tellings, suggests reasons having to do with Indian-white relations and with the Kwakiutl use of theatrical effects in ceremony; but he never suggests that George Hunt underwent a major change in belief (1966:120-121; 125).

The coexistence of two such versions of a narrative is fascinating in many ways; for a reader of "The Boy Who Could Not Walk" perhaps the chief thing to be kept in mind is that a factual and a mythified version of the same narrative can exist in the mind of the same person. The presence of a mythified version need mean neither that an unmythified version has been forgotten nor that a different narrator has worked on the material. Exposure to Hunt's two versions leaves us dissatisfied also with the very term "mythification," in that it seems to imply that something is added to the factual narrative, whereas the supernatural dimension of the event may have been the very thing that was originally experienced and told of, the "facts" becoming of interest only at some later time or for a different audience. We need not even posit a process or insist upon the passage of time: both mythic and non-mythic aspects of an experience may be perceived simultaneously, whether articulated or not.

To speak of a history or memoir-to-myth continuum -- but without implying a history or memoir-to-myth process -- is a way of resisting the application of an abrupt demarcation between "fact" and narrative to a literature and a way of thought which resist such categorization. Elmendorf in his remarks on Twana literature posits such a continuum, basing it on the time in which a narrative is set and rejecting the notion of genre entirely (1961:7-10). But it is necessary to consider further whether setting may be in fact only an aspect of narrative point of view. It should be noted as well that critics tend to accept as documentary those accounts which are told in the first person or are told by someone who heard them directly from "I." Had Hunt's earlier version of his experience come to us in an anonymous, third-person account, the chances are that critical opinion would have categorized it too as myth.

Both Snyder and Ramsey hesitate to allow the possibility that one storyteller in possession of the historical facts might compose either a legend or a myth instead of a historical narrative, using those facts as a basis. This hesitancy may well reflect the difficulty that a non-Indian can have in bringing home to himself the fact that an Indian literary artist really may believe things that seem unbelievable to a non-Indian inquirer. Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Conrad belonged to a culture in which everyone was expected to have supernatural experiences. A narrative such as "The Boy Who Could Not Walk" might be told in a household at the very time when one of its children was out training or looking for spirit power. It does not do, then, to see stories such as this only as narratives midway in a career of replacing fact with myth. "Legend" or "myth" may be

someone's consciously chosen best way of saying what she needs to say about experience.

NOTE: I wish to thank Pamela Amoss for calling my attention to the George Hunt texts referred to in this paper. A transcription and translation of Mrs. Conrad's story will appear in the forthcoming volume of Lushootseed texts edited by Thom Hess and Vi Hilbert. Vi Hilbert's transcription of Mrs. Peter's story (from Reel 58 in the Leon Metcalf Collection at the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum) is in the collection at Lushootseed Research, Inc.

APPENDIX

Schematic Analysis: Figuration in Mrs. Conrad's "The Boy Who Could Not Walk"

I Introduction (1-14)

1-7 People lived there.	circular narration
8-13 One child was crippled.	
14 People lived there.	

II Motivation for quest (15-30)

15-18 Time of year (circ. fig.)	
19-23 People's activities (summer)	
24-28 Mother's speech and son's reaction	circular narration
29-30 People's activities (fall)	

IIIa Journey into the wilderness (31-44)

31-34 He goes.
35-39 He camps.
40-44 He camps.

IVa Parents discover the boy is gone (45-56)

45-46 They are moving.	circular narration with cap
47-52 They look for him.	
53-54 They stop moving.	
55-56 They look for him.	

IIIb Journey into the wilderness (57-66)

57 He is still camping (circ. ref. to 40-44)	
58-62 Crawling	
63 His destination	overlapping circular figures
64 Crawling (duration; arrival)	
65 His destination	
66 Crawling (duration; arrival)	

IVb His parents give up (67-70)	(Note interlace of III and IV)
IIIc Journey into the wilderness (71-73) (arrival: circ. ref. to 66)	

Va Quest -- further purification (74-96)

Lines	Event	Figure
74-76	(A) The spirit power sends someone to look at the boy.	
77-79	(B) The messenger does so.	
80-84	(C) The boy's condition is reviewed.	parallel
85-92	The boy becomes cleaner.	narrative
93	(A) The spirit power sends someone to look at the boy.	
94	(B) The messenger does so.	
95-96	(C) The boy's condition is reviewed.	

Vb Quest -- cure (97-136)

Lines	Event	Figure
97-98	(A) The spirit power sends someone to fetch the boy.	
99-102	(B) The messenger does so.	
103-104	The name of the spirit power	
105-108	(C) The boy's condition is reviewed.	parallel
109-111	(A1) The spirit power instructs his helpers to cure the boy.	narrative
112-116	(B1) The helpers do so.	
117-128	(c1) The boy's new condition is reviewed.	

Vc Quest -- envoi (129-136)

Lines	Event	Figure
129-130	(A2, B2) The spirit power sends someone outside with the boy.	
131-136	(C2) He instructs the boy.	

VI The boy returns home (137-184)

Lines	Event	Figure
137-144	He travels to his village.	
145-146	His parents are sad.	
147-152	His mother does not recognize him.	circ. org./
153-159	His mother does not recognize him.	parallel
160-166	His mother sees "a person."	core
167-171	His parents are sad.	
172-176	His father does not recognize him.	cap/circ. org.
177-184	His mother decides to believe the boy is her son; he instructs her.	pendant/circ. org.

VII Validation of spiritual power (185-240)

Lines	Event	Figure
185-195	The mother invites people and finds two orphans.	
196	The boy sings his power.	
197-202	He tells of his experience.	circular
203	The boy sings his power.	figure
204	The boy sings his power.	
205-208	Animals arrive:	
209-210	Land animals	concentric
211-213	Fish	narration
214	Animals arrive.	
215	*He comes home*	
216-217	*with what has been given him*	overlapping
218	The boy sings his power.	circular
219	*He arrived.* *	figures
220-225	He instructs people.	

Lines	Event	Figure
226-227	They follow instructions	
227	before he sings.	
228	After he sings,	
229-240	people are well off	pendant

*The concentric narration (204-218) and the circular narration (218-228) overlap. The circular figure in 215-219 interlocks with both of the other figures. The chronology of this last section is difficult to understand except in terms of figuration: form has superseded event-string.

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