The Raven Cycle: Mythology In Process

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One of the dominant figures in North American mythology is Raven whose story is to be found not only on the West Coast of British Columbia, in the Canadian Arctic, and in Alaska, but even in Eastern Siberia. Within living memory he was still a potent symbol of knowledge and ubiquity. George Clutesi, the noted Indian author, artist, and actor, describes how potlatches were initiated by the "crack and cackle of a raven's call" and the words:

> Tidings, tidings, tidings. The raven brings tidings. Hark ye! The raven journeys to all places. The raven sees all things. The raven smells all things. He knows all that comes to pass. Listen now and take heed of the message he brings us all.[1]

When early twentieth Century ethnologists[2] began recording the myths of the Kwakiutl, Haida, and Tsimshian in British Columbia, the Tlingit in Alaska, the Loucheux and Dènè in the Mackenzie area, and the Koriak and Chukchee in Siberia, they encountered a curiously complex character. There seemed, in fact, to be three Ravens. The divine Creator of the world produced man from a leaf, a pea vine or a lump of clay. The culture-hero born of his sister (whom he had impregnated by falling into her drinking water as a leaf, evergreen needle, feather, or piece of dirt) gave man food, fire, light, technology, and rituals with which to honour the animals which he must kill. The oldest character of all, according to Paul Radin,[3] was the Trickster Raven, greedy, impudent, dishonest, treacherous, cruel, and obscene, forever playing tricks or being tricked. Possessing both an animal and a human form, Raven represents the Native desire to embody in one figure the polarities of life with its capacity for creation and destruction, altruism and self-indulgence, intelligence and stupidity.

The process of converting legends transmitted orally in Native dialects into literature written in English requires translation and adaptation. The author must first decide what form the work is to take. He may choose to reproduce the sound of the story-teller's voice as Dale De Armand does in "Raven and the Daughter of the Nass":

> That Raven don't make no more sound than fog. He roll that bundle into the corner where it's dark and untie it quick and that beautiful moon go floating out the smoke

hole and up up into the sky where it still hangs. Oh! that grandpa is mad! He yell and he holler and everybody run. He beat them two slaves and he tell his daughter she's a bad mother. Everybody catch hell except that Raven. That tricky old Raven just creep up to his grandpa and hold out his arms and that old man a fool over that baby he can't do nothing.[4]

But the broken English used by De Armand's source, either because the collector did not understand the native dialect or because the storyteller himself heard the tale that way,[5] fails to convey the "special magic" of the original. In the old days, says the Reverend Peter Kelly (a Haida of noble blood),[6] a good narrator spoke

in more or less poetic form . . . in certain spots in the course of storytelling, the words seemed to be in a class above the ordinary. Great things required great words. There were some words not understood today — very old words never used in ordinary conversation, and yet you knew what they meant.[6]

The literary adaptor must also consider problems of structure and embellishment. In their oral form, the tales may seem rambling and inconsequential. Characters may be so skeletal as to lack even names. While the tribal entertainer can take for granted his audience's knowledge of locale, custom, and ritual, those who write for a non-Native audience must provide patterns of cause and effect, identifiable characters and a cultural context. An example of a story requiring some literary assistance is an Alaskan folktale, "The Raven Who Ate the Dog Skin," reproduced here in its entirety:

There were two people somewhere. A raven got married to a woman there. The two stayed there. One time a man killed a fat dog to have the skin for his pants. He hung the skin outside to dry. The raven went over and started eating from the skin. He tore it up. When they went to the Karegi the man that killed the dog had the men take their mukluks off because there were raven tracks around. They were getting close to the raven. The raven said, "Everybody has five toes." When they almost reached him the raven jumped up, got a little knife, and told the man. "Come on, let's poke each other with knives." (The end).[7]

Integrating the world of myth and the world of experience through the birdman Raven, storytellers drew on a common body of lore but details of setting varied according to the geographical and cultural circumstances of a particular tribe. In the Haida Creation myth, the light-giving bodies are kept in wooden boxes secreted in a corner of the Fisherman's lodge. The Tahltan Raven takes the sun, moon, and stars from the Great Chief's longhouse. The Alaskan Raven finds them hanging from the rafters of a dome-shaped hut, while the Copper Eskimos imagine them kept in clay jars in the Grizzly's igloo. Obviously an

adaptor must settle on a specific area so that his secondary world of the imagination will be consistent.

Added to such variables as the level of language, the characterisation of Raven, and the depiction of setting is a fourth consideration: the intended audience. The incest, bestiality, scatology, excessive violence and sometimes murky moral perspective of the originals are out of place in children's literature.

Fran Martin's *Raven-Who-Sets-Things-Right* (New York and Toronto: Harper and Row, 1975) provides young children with a good introduction to West Coast mythology. Faithful to her ethnological sources,[8] Mrs. Martin catches the ethos of a society where stories were "both history and science":

> It was on winter nights when the evening meal was done, that the great carved houses would come alive. The fire, fed by grease from the evening's cooking, would crackle and flare, and a trail of smoke rising up to the smoke hole would make the carved animal on the house posts seem to writhe and wink their abalone eyes. Then all the cousins would gather close, and the best of the tellers of tales — man or woman, but often one of the Old Ones — would begin.

As culture-hero, Raven provides men with fresh water, daylight, a bounty of fish from the Everlasting House, and good advice which, when ignored, furnishes the occasion for hortatory tales about the Cannibal-of-the-North-end-of-the-World and the vengeance of the Mountain Goats. Raven-who-sets-things-right becomes the Greedy one after having swallowed a shred of bullhead; then his insatiable appetite instigates the trickery which provides comic relief in a collection marked by good humour and lively dialogue.

George Clutesi's *Son of raven, son of deer* (Sidney: Gray, 1967) is another collection of separate fables, intended to teach the young members of the Tse-shaht people "the many wonders of nature; the importance of all living things, no matter how small and insignificant." Using a formula not unlike that in Kipling's *Jungle books,* Clutesi creates an enclosed world of forest and sea to contain a hero, Ah-tush-mit the deer; an anti-hero, Ko-ishin-mit the Raven; their families; friends; and enemies. Raven as trickster is considerably toned down from the malicious and cruel destroyer of the Tlingits. A vain, foolish, incompetent little glutton, Ko-ishin-mit generally ends up hoisted on his own petard. His secret weapon, an extra long herring rake, shoots out of the water, giving him a swollen, black nose. His attempt to copy Chims-meet the bear by drawing oil from the fire gives him black feathers and curved claws. He breaks his ankle while imitating Son of Snipe and is reduced to a hop-skip-and-jump movement on land after challenging the spear-throwing champion, Son of Skate. Yet despite repeated humiliation and suffering, Ko-ishin-mit never seems to learn that "it is not wise to copy other people."

These witty stories, which are both aetiological and morally didactic, are recounted in a kind of poetic prose interlaced with poetry that is entirely suited

to the genre and the milieu:

> Red leaves sailed down the ever-increasing currents of the streams. The mist rose from the waters to meet the fresh nip in the chill of the morning air. It was late fall. The moon of the cutting and smoking season was drawing to a close. Every household in the village was busy putting in the last of their winter's supply of dried salmon, preparing to pack it away in huge cedar food chests . . . . . Ko-ishin-mit sat by his own little fire poking at the embers with his fire stick and wishing he could have some of the newly-smoked salmon for his next meal (p. 63).

This sense of rightness affecting language, setting, and characterisation is notably lacking in Gail Robinson's most recent publication, *Raven the trickster* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981). Both Indian and Eskimo versions[9] are used without the acknowledgement of sources or the clear differentiation of regions. Though the author is described as a Canadian poet, she has lived in England since 1959 and her retellings are manifestly intended for a British rather than North American audience. The Raven material is treated as unlocalised European folktale. Like Clutesi, the author aims at a poetic prose style, weighting her sentences with images so often inappropriate or absurd that the effect is bathetic — a mountain goat "as quick on the rocks as a snowflake is to melt in the sun"; a sun that "bled through the crevices of the wintering sky"; "blankets with islands of holes in them"; and a rock that popped out of its place "as though squeezing a seed from a ripe caragana pod." Falseness of tone also affects the dialogue. The Salmon people are disconcertingly modern when they shout, "Who does he think he is?" Ook, the possessor of fire, sounds like an English schoolmistress: "Very well, tell your so-called great chief that he may honour me if he so wishes," and the middle brother among the Cannibal seekers is decidedly priggish in conversation.

As a storyteller, Miss Robinson's powers are not negligible. In "How Raven Brought the Salmon" her central character is vividly presented through his encounters with Chipmunk, Bear, and the Salmon people. His trickster characteristics of greed and cunning are directly related to plot development without countering his role of culture hero. However, the lack of a consistent, apprehensible secondary world mars *Raven the trickster*, a collection which entertains without helping the reader to understand the relationship between Native mythology and the landscape and culture which produced it.

While the collections so far discussed consist of independent stories about a central character, Robert Ayre's *Stetko the raven* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961) further unifies the material through the structural device of a quest in which the hero is aided by helpful agents and obstructed by opponents. The fear of spirits controlling the natural world, an essential element in the original myths, is neutralized by turning Thunder Man, Fog Man, and the giant who sits on

the tide into comic characters. The evil uncle, Grizzly Man, the embodiment of evil, is made a terrifying enemy, however, so that the hero may demonstrate his quality in the archetypal way, by overcoming a monster. Although the narration is often pedestrian, Ayre can convincingly convey the range of emotions embodied in myth: the terror of the Indians whose village the Grizzly has desolated; the pathos of the drowned boys who, rescued from the otherworld, can no longer endure the brightness of sun and sharpness of sand; the wonder of the hero when he feels the ghosts in the Lonely House. He also conveys something of West Coast culture through references to spell-weaving shamans, fishing rituals, articles made of cedar, hemlock, and bone, wooden boxes in which food is cooked with hot stones, and oil squeezed from oolachan. Finally, by providing patterns of cause and effect, a chronological sequence of events, and plot movement towards a climactic act of heroism, Ayre ensures that the young reader will be carried forward from one episode to the next.

Yves Troendle's *Raven's children* (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan, 1979) is generically more sophisticated for it is described as "a novel based on the myths of the Northwest Coast Indians."[10] It is set in a time before European contact, when the coastal tribes had developed a culture that has been described as "one of the richest and most distinctive in the world."[11] The basic social organisation was the autonomous kin group, possessing specific territory and privileges deriving from a mythic ancestor such as Thunderbird, Halibut, or Bear.

Raven's children is an Indian Odyssey. When their village is destroyed by a powerful spirit to avenge her frog-son's death, the only survivors, a brother and sister called Satsum and Gyila, become separated and must wander for years before finding one another again and reestablishing their village. The doubling of the plot line through the brother-sister device enables the author to describe a variety of societies and experiences: a wealthy slave-owning society to the south, the underwater world of the Salmon people; the Bear society where Gyila takes as her husband a shape-shifting Bear Prince; and the dream world of the Shaman. Troendle integrates the human and the animal, the natural and the supernatural with such skill that each medium seems equally real.

A scrupulous choice of sensory details makes us identify easily with the Salmon people to whom Satsum's dead master has been born again. Joining the cycle of the Spring Salmon, Satsum turned salmon swims out to sea:

> There the yellow-green shafts of light that shot down through the water danced on the fishes' back . . . The salmon travelled so far out that finally they were swimming among the stars, silver in the starlight. How long did they loop and coil there?

When the man who lives inside the sun turns his salmon embroidered cape inside out, the salmon jump up the rivers where the fishermen wait. Satsum "jumped over traps and danced around spears as he fought through the tossing water,"

but finally he is caught and born again into the world of men, popping as a newborn child from the belly of the salmon.

In *Raven's children* the cultural context is evoked by reference to the kinds of artifacts that we are used to seeing in British Columbia's Provincial Museum or in the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology: painted and carved housefronts, a copper crown decorated with a flat hawk's face and sea lion whiskers on the crown, a bear's head mask opening to show a woman's face, a red and black shaman's rattle carved to represent Raven. The geographic setting encompasses villages strung along the ocean's edge, cliffs slippery with seaweed and spray, berry patches where the spirits of the dead still linger, rugged mountains where knife-sharp blocks of snow make difficult travelling for Gyila and her bear-children.

Though there is, perhaps, too much incident and too little characterisation for a self-styled novel (it is more accurately a romance), one should not quibble. My only real complaint concerns the Raven myths, which are tacked on awkwardly at the end instead of being recounted by the storytelling Grandmother and the shaman Yelldugu. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that Raven still has the power to inspire modern storytellers and mythographers and it is interesting to find an author who, in the manner of Tolkien and Garner, attempts to create something new from the traditional myth and folktales.

NOTES

[1]George Clutesi, *Potlatch* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray, 1969), p. 41.

[2]eg. Franz Boas, "The mythology of the Bella Coola Indians," Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 2, pt. 2 (1898) and Tsimshian Texts and Tsimshian Mythology, Bulletin #31, Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institute (Washington, 1909-1910); John R. Swanton, "Contributions to the ethnology of the Haida," AMNH vol. 5, pt. 1 (1905); "Tlingit Myths and Texts," BAEB. #39 (1909).

[3]Paul Radin, *The trickster, a study in American Indian mythology* (New York: Greenwood, 1956), pp. 105-7.

[4]Dale De Armand, *Raven* (Anchorage, Alaska: University of Alaska, 1975). No pagination in text.

[5]Catherine McClennan, *The girl who married the bear, a masterpiece of Indian oral tradition,* National Museum of Man Publications in Ethnology #2 (Ottawa, 1970), p. 2.

[6]Cited by Norman Newton in *Fire in the raven's nest: the Haida of British Columbia* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), p. 79.

[7]Recorded by E.S. Hall in *The Eskimo story-teller: folktales from Noatak, Alaska* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

[8]Boas, *op. cit.*, Swanton, *op. cit.*

[9]Other adaptations of Eskimo legends are found in Maurice Métayer, *Tales from the igloo,* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972), Romona Maher, *The blind boy and the loon and other Eskimo myths* (New York: Day, 1969); and Ronald Melzak, *Raven, creator of the world* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

[10]Troendle's sources, in addition to Boas and Swanton, include three works by

Marius Barbeau: *Haida myths,* National Museum of Canada Bulletin #127 (1953); *Medicine men on the north pacific coast,* NMC Bulletin #152 (1958); and *Totem Poles,* NMC Bulletin #119-1 (1950).

[11]Peter L. Macnair, Alan L. Hoover, Kevin Neary, *The legacy: continuing traditions of Canadian northwest coast Indian Art* (Victoria, B.C.: B.C. Government, 1980), p. 18.

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