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Andrew Peynetsa's Telling of "The Boy and the Deer": Storytelling and Double Binds

Andrew Peynetsa's telling of "The Boy and the Deer," contained in Dennis Tedlock's collection of his translations of Zuni traditional narratives, Finding the Center, uses economical means to achieve a powerful emotional effect. The first and longest part of the story recounts the protagonist's miraculous conception, birth, and upbringing by a deer family, and his recognition by and return to his human family. The concluding part tells the tragic consequences for the boy-protagonist of this recognition and return. In both parts, storytelling is depicted as playing a decisive role in the unfolding of the story's action. One suppressed story at the start, the story of the boy-hero's conception by a priest's daughter by the Sun, his birth and abandonment by his mother, leads to the telling of a number of stories about the boy, told in order to reverse the effects of the original suppressed story and to return the boy to the human world. But these same stories in the end paradoxically undermine this process of reintegration. Stories act both to restore the hero to his cultural status and to prevent this from happening. The same stories carry opposite messages in different situations and thus act as double binds on the boy-hero. That his restoration to his society puts him in a psychologically impossible situation is the source of much of the story's poignancy.

To grasp the specific qualities of Peynetsa's rendition, we should first sketch out the course of its action. It begins with the

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daughter of a Zuni priest finding herself pregnant by the Sun (who is regarded as the primal "Father" in Zuni cosmology). She goes into the wilderness (ostensibly to wash a bundle of clothes), bears a male child, and abandons him. The boy is found, nursed and reared by a family of deer. The deer-mother also obtains two sets of clothes for the boy from the kachina-priests of Kachina Village, the underwater home of the ancestral gods of the Zuni. The boy's uncle eventually spots him among the deer and organizes a hunt to retrieve the boy. The boy's deer-mother explains to him the facts of his parentage, predicts the coming hunt (which will result in the killing of the boy's deer-family and his return to his native village) and instructs him how to tell the story of his life and establish his relationship with his mother and family.

Things fall out as the deer-mother had predicted. The boy tells his tale and his human mother acknowledges him. The boy then fruitlessly goes through the motions of being a hunter. His human mother requests him to obtain some of the long sharp blades of the yucca plant for her to use in her basketweaving (the same activity she had been engaged in at the beginning of the story when the Sun made her pregnant). When the boy pulls out the center blades of a yucca plant, it pierces his heart and he dies.

The first part of this story (up to the boy's telling his story and his recognition and reception by his mother and family) bears a strong resemblance to the traditional narratives analyzed by the psychoanalyst Otto Rank in his The Myth of the Birth of the Hero. These

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narratives, bearing a striking similarity among themselves on certain important points, are distributed over a wide range of cultures.

> The hero is a child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibitions or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophesy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. After he is grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on the father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors. (Rank 64)

Rank not only shows the extraordinarily wide diffusion of this pattern (he cites, among other examples, the myths of the births of Moses, Sargon, Gilgamesh, Paris, Telephus, Cyrus, Oedipus, and Romulus), but he also provides an explanation of the myth's origins, form and appeal. It is, says Rank, a representation of the child's mixed feelings of love and hate for his parents. The child idealizes and admires his parents on the one hand; on the other, he resents them and wishes to downgrade them to his own level or below. In the myth these contradictory emotions find representation by

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splitting the original pair of parents into two sets: the highborn parents of birth, whom the child admires and with whom he identifies his essence, and the lowborn adoptive parents of the child's actual experience, animals or humble humans, to whom he can inwardly feel superior, while still expressing gratitude for their nurturing function. The climax of the story corresponds to the child's fantasy that the highborn parents will reappear and recognize his exalted status. The drama of the career of the mythic hero is actually the dream, compounded of fantasy and reality, of the Everychild who (psychoanalysis assures us) still lives within all of us.

Rank notes other characteristic features of this group of myths, features which also apply to "The Boy and the Deer." For instance, the human mother in the Zuni story is depicted at the beginning and end as weaving baskets. She gives birth to the boy near a river, and places the baby in a hole lined with juniper leaves, a structure analogous both to a basket and a womb (Tedlock 4). Rank points out that these details can be considered a symbolic representation of the process of birth itself:

> In fairy tales, the birth of a man is frequently represented as a lifting of the child from a well or a lake.
>
> The utilization of the same material in the dreams of healthy people and neurotics signifies no more and no less than the *symbolic experience of birth*. The children come out of the water. The basket, box, or receptacle, simply means the container, the womb, so the exposure

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> directly signifies the process of birth, although it is represented by its opposite. (Rank 73-74)

In the same vein, Rank refers to Freud's comment on a dream "in which the dreamer hurls herself into the dark water of a lake": "Dreams of this sort are birth dreams, and their interpretation is accomplished by reversing the fact as communicated in the manifest dream; namely, instead of hurling oneself into the water, it means emerging from the water, i.e., to be born" (Rank 75). We can readily apply Freud's interpretation to the versions of the Zuni story told by Peynetsa in which the deer-mother visits Kachina Village to appeal for appropriate clothes for the boy; since the Kachina Village is at the bottom of a sacred lake, the deer-mother must descend to and ascend from the lake bottom to make her visit, the purpose of which is to obtain appropriate clothes for the boy. The obtaining of clothes is symbolically another birth.

This leads to a further insight into the Peynetsa retelling of "The Boy and the Deer." Each stage in the boy's development is accompanied by a change of clothes or the equivalent. When the boy is drawn out of the juniper leaf-lined hole by the deer (a symbolic birth), they draw around him and warm him with their fur (symbolic of clothes) (Tedlock 4-6). The deer-mother's two journeys to Kachina Village correspond to two further stages in the boy's career: his life with the deer herd and his re-entry into the world of men (Tedlock 9-17).

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Further, the recognition scene in which the boy finds his human family includes a depiction of the bodies of the deer family laid out on cloth and decorated with turquoise (Tedlock 27). Their death, in turn, is actually a rebirth in the world of Kachina Village (Tedlock 32). Each instance of new clothes or ornament is a signal of a new stage of identity and cultural status. With this in mind it is easier to understand the seemingly casual reference to the priest's daughter going out to give birth to the boy carrying a bundle of clothes, which she washes after the birth and returns home with. In the context of the patterns of this story, the clothes are the social status and identity she has "laundered" by abandoning the child and avoiding the stigma of unwed motherhood (Tedlock 4-5).

So far I have examined how Rank's psycholoanalytically oriented theory points up recurrent patterns in "The Boy and the Deer" and gives a deeper understanding of their significance. The story up to the recognition and return scene conforms fairly closely to Rank's summary of the myth of the birth of the hero. But after this scene to the end of the story, the Zuni tale diverges significantly from Rank's paradigm. In Peynetsa's retelling, the priest's daughter "embraces" the boy at the end of the climactic identification scene, but makes no other expression of emotion (Tedlock 27), just as she expressed no emotion in giving birth to and abandoning her son at the beginning of the tale (4-5). The emotional numbness of the human mother is contrasted by implication with the active concern of the deer-mother.

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More pointedly, Peynetsa contrasts the human mother's callousness with the deer-mother's tenderness. The deer-mother is made to speak an embittered indictment of the human mother's behavior while telling the boy the story of his birth:

> and when you were about to come out
> she had pains, got out of the water
> went to a TREE and there she just DROPPED
> you.
> THAT is your MOTHER.
> She's in a room on the fourth story down
> making
> basket-plaques, that's what you'll tell
> them.
> THAT'S WHAT SHE DID TO YOU, SHE JUST
> DROPPED YOU. (16-17)

Following the prompting given in the deer-mother's narrative, the boy's recital of his story to his human mother and family is not only an identification but an accusation, contrasting the human mother's indifference with the deer-mother's fostering care, and concluding with the climatic, accusatory "THAT'S WHAT YOU DID AND YOU ARE MY REAL MOTHER" (27).

Because the Peynetsa rendition of the story is eloquent about this contrast, it confirms Rank's point about the split in the child's perception between mother who gives birth and the mother who nurtures. But in the Zuni story this split is not healed or glossed over; in fact it is aggravated. After the recognition and return scene, where the boy is acknowledged by his mother, the deer family is skinned and served as dinner. As Joseph Peynetsa commented, "I suppose the boy didn't

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eat the deer meat, because he said, 'This is my mother, my sister, my brother'" (32). Because of his past, his story, the boy cannot be integrated into the culturally defined role of deer hunter, and by extension, he cannot be integrated into the family. His conduct expresses his ambivalence about his oral satisfactions: under one set of conditions he blissfully feeds from the breast of his deer mother, and under another set of conditions he seems to be cannibalistically feeding on the same mother.

The boy borrows his grandfather's quiver (the grandfather-priest here substitutes for the inaccessible Sun-father):

> He went out, having been given the quiver, and wandered around.
> He wandered around, he wasn't thinking of killing deer, he just wandered around.
> In the evening he came home empty-handed. (28)

It is impossible for the boy to identify with the male role in this culture, the role of the uncles and the grandfather who kill the nurturing deer-mother and eat her. To act up to expectations in one's role is to destroy the nurturer who prepared him for the role: that is the double bind facing the boy.

Ruth Benedict, in her collection of anthropological studies, Patterns of Culture, writes that since Zuni society is arranged around matrilineal households,

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> every arrangement militates against the possibility of the child's suffering from an Oedipus complex. Malinowski has pointed out for the Trobriands that the structure of society gives to the uncle authority that is associated in our culture with the father. In Zuni, not even the uncles exercise authority. Occasions are not tolerated which would demand its exercise. The child grows up without either the resentments or the compensatory daydreams of ambition that have their roots in this familial situation. (Benedict 101-102)

My analysis of Peynetsa's story in the light of Rank does not permit me to accept Benedict's sunny analysis. Indeed, the Peynetsa story carries the Oedipal crisis to an extreme, because there is never any father to confront--or rather, because the Sun-father is omnipotent and omnipresent in the "daylight" (human) world. For the boy, to imitate the uncle and grandfather in order to win the favor (perhaps) of his human mother by deer hunting means he must kill his nurturing deer-family. To gain nurturance, he must destroy those who nurtured him. The boy retreats; he does not assume the role of the adult male, the deer hunter; instead he responds to his human mother's request to help her in the female role of basketweaving, to bring her the (phallic-shaped) yucca plant blades. The situation has returned to the one with which the story started. The priest's daughter is weaving baskets, but the boy cannot hope to wield the fertilizing power of his Sun-father; he must content himself with a symbolic substitution, the yucca plant blades.

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Benedict informs us in Patterns of Culture that whippings with yucca blades are important in the initiations of boys into the ceremonial religious life of Zuni males (Benedict 69-70). The boy, in contrast, pulls out the long blades "from the center of the yucca plant" and dies as the blades enter his heart (Tedlock 28-29). The ending of Peynetsa's telling of "The Boy and the Deer" can be interpreted as the catastrophe following upon the unsuccessful resolution of the boy's Oedipal crisis. The boy, at the mother's request, symbolically castrates himself (pulling out the yucca blades) and the result is his death. The real father, the Sun, can never be rivaled or brought to account, and all hope of obtaining the mother's love is lost. The boy has no place in the world as a "daylight person"; his only option is a return to death to the "raw people," his deer-family and the beneficent Kachina-priests of the underwater (pre-birth) Kachina Village.

I can recall no other story that in so limited a space puts so intense an emphasis on the process of storytelling, and no other in which we are made to feel so much the inadequacy of storytelling for the humans most concerned. The deer-mother tells the story of her discovery of the boy to the Kachinas; the uncle tells his story of discovering the boy twice, once to his household and then to the priest, the boy's grandfather. The deer-mother tells the boy the story of his past, present, and immediate future, and explains how he is to tell his story to his new family and community; the boy does tell his story to the family and community. What is the effect? If we identify with the boy, it all seems of no avail. Certainly he hasn't changed the Sun, or his own human mother.

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"Surely I could be anyone's mother, for we have many children" she responds to him (Tedlock 25), and at the end of the story she weaves baskets in the same unmoved impervious fashion that allowed the Sun to impregnate her at the story's beginning.

"The Boy and the Deer" thus ends as the story of the imposition upon the boy of a double bind. If the boy assumes the culturally determined role of deer-hunter which the whole narrative up to the point of the boy's recognition and reception by his family has brought him to (Tedlock 27), then he must destroy those who saved him, nurtured him and sacrificed their lives for him. This itself is a repetition and a reversal of the situation faced by the human mother at the start of the tale. If the story that she bore a son out of wedlock gets out, she will likely face drastic punishment, no matter what the real reasons for the pregnancy are. Her abandonment of the boy is her attempt to abandon, to erase, this story. At the end of "The Boy and the Deer," the boy is being invited to repeat his mother's choice. If he suppresses his past, forgets his debt to his nurturing deer-mother and kills other deer to live up to the demands of his social status and role, then he in a way is doing to the other deer what his mother did to him, attempting to destroy them in order to preserve a social role.

Each step of "The Boy and the Deer" is marked by a telling of the suppressed story: to the Kachinas, to the boy himself, and finally to his human mother and family. The last telling of the story of the boy's identity and up-bringing defeats the suppression by the mother of the story of his birth (Tedlock 27). But

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more drastic punishment for her is averted, because the boy's story also explains his miraculous conception by the Sun, which means that his mother cannot really be held responsible for her pregnancy. Both the suppression and the telling of the boy's story have their root in a breach in the barriers between the human and divine orders, between "daylight" and "raw" worlds: the Sun has caused a woman to conceive; animals and Kachinas help the infant survive. The return of the boy to human society and his subsequent death put an end to this anomalous situation. But it is done at the expense of the boy's happiness and his life. Stories in "The Boy and the Deer" in the long run solve cultural paradoxes, not individual emotional and psychological dilemmas.

We can state the underlying double bind set up in this tale by noting that the tellings of the previously suppressed stories of the boy's birth and life first restore him to his cultural status and role as a Zuni male and then prevent him from acting appropriately in that role and status; to so act, to be a deer hunter, would be to destroy those who saved and raised him. The repetitions of the story have taken the boy from being a deer without letting him be fully a human, as it is understood in Zuni culture. Death is the only escape, in this instance, from simultaneous and mutually negating demands. From the point of view of the boy as an individual, storytelling both heals and kills.

But storytelling does have an ultimately consolatory nature for listeners to and readers of this story. It comes from placing the individual human's fate in the context of the

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Zuni cosmos and culture. In this context, the boy successfully resolves his dilemmas by entering "the roads of his elders" (in order, presumably, to find his deer-family). The story affirms the necessary connections between the various elements in the Zuni worldview: deer, kachinas, the Sun; the family, the community, the individual. The first, silenced, catastrophic breach of boundaries in the Zuni world-order, the impregnation of the priest's daughter by the Sun, is eventually resolved by successive actions, especially by acts of narration. The world and its animal and human inhabitants face changes in the course of this process, but underlying and complicated connections are affirmed between the elements of the Zuni world, and this is something that the human mother's abandonment of the boy and suppression of his story would have denied, if it had prevailed.

Storytelling in "The Boy and the Deer," from the standpoint of the boy's individual earthly life, is the source of paradox, tragedy, and double binds. From the standpoint of the culture that acts as a context of a story, it is the source of paradox, transformation, making connections, healing of ruptures. Triumph becomes tragedy because narratives have the ability to convey opposed commands, not only when they are given but when they carry their imperatives into a new and changed context. If the audience feels ambiguous about the power of storytelling at the end of "The Boy and the

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Deer," it is because the tale shows that even the best-intentioned narratives can have ambiguous and even self-negating effects.

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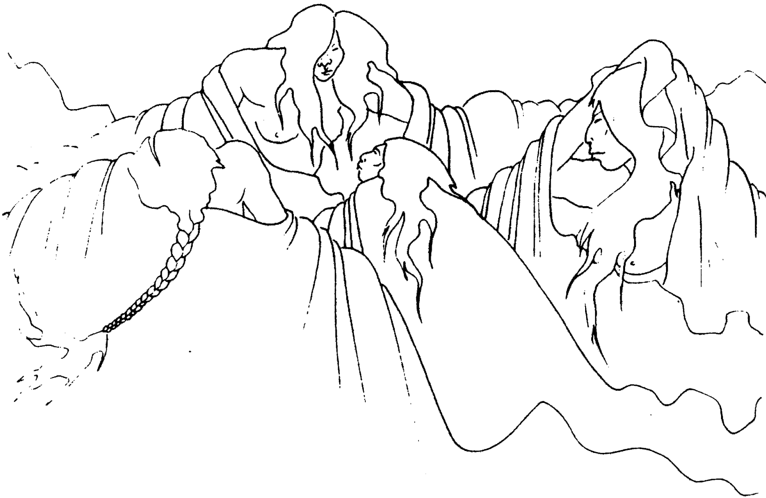

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