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## The Search for Origins through Storytelling in Native American Literature: Momaday, Silko, Erdrich

In Native American literature two opposing cultural modes are linked: the oral tradition of the People and the written tradition of the white man. The oral tradition is rooted in the ancient voices of the tribes, their stories, myths and rites that give rise to an art which, while adhering to its own rules and laws, nonetheless adjusts to the passing of time and "comes up different every time" (Erdrich 1988, 31). At the opposite pole is the written record which, with its static, immutable page, imposes itself on the oral tradition and, in so doing, distorts it.

This polarity can be traced throughout Native American writing, constantly weaving in and out throughout its development. The problem of translating ancestral idioms and language into English has increased the tension inherent in this polarity and has become of crucial importance for the Native American writer of today.

In his memoir, *The Names*, N. Scott Momaday clearly affirms: "I know the voices of my parents, of my grandmother, of others. Their voices, their words, English and Kiowa—and the silences that lie about them—are already the element of my mind's life" (8). Thus, the juxtaposition of the two cultural poles provides the catalyst for the artistic creation of Native American writers; in attempting to resolve the conflict between oral and written culture, in trying to write in the same way and in the same spirit in which their ancestors told their tales, they reveal the inner conflict of the artist undertaking this cultural step; that is, the fear of betraying the oral tradition at the moment of writing.

This conflict has been delineated indirectly by Momaday in the character of Abel in *House Made of Dawn*. Abel's is a dark conflict which he feels deep down within himself. It arises from a double incapacity. On the one hand he feels the call of the past but is incapable

of understanding it, of penetrating into the ancient rhythm of his own language; on the other, Abel is incapable of adapting to the white man's world and understanding his language. As Momaday points out, Abel is a man without a voice (Prampolini). It is the same painful inner conflict which Silko has demonstrated so acutely in her work *Ceremony*. In this novel, Tayo, the principal character, suffers a nervous breakdown owing to his failure to solve his identity crisis. Abel and Tayo both resolve their conflicts by turning to the Native American tradition in which resides the power to restore the mind, the only healing power capable of effecting a complete mental recovery even while the Indian lives in a world virtually belonging to the whites. The same situation appears also in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*. Here, however, the mixed-blood Pauline's progressive loss of identity and traumatic disintegration of the self leads to a result which is diametrically opposed to that proposed by Momaday and Silko, for Pauline rejects tradition and finally negates it in order to embrace the white man's religion.

The reason for the alienation and disgregation of these characters is also to be sought in the unfathomable sense of emptiness and fear which permeates Native American culture from its origin myths to its modern day narratives. An obscure feeling of loss is at the basis of the Kiowa myth of creation and is described by Momaday in *The Names* as an integral part of their myth of origin. According to this myth, "the Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log." Their emergence from the "primordial darkness" to the light is seen ironically as a totally unexpected event, almost as a trick. In addition, it implies a cosmic wound in the loss of ancestral unity. "Loss was in the order of things, then, from the beginning" (1). This sense of impotence and fatalism is due, as Momaday says, to "the dread of being, of having been in some dark predestination, held still, and in that profoundly shamed" (36). This predestination, which forged the nomadic destiny of the Kiowas in their migration from the mountains to the Southern Plains, was fulfilled when they were defeated in the infamous winter campaigns of the Seventh Cavalry during the Indian wars and their nascent Plains culture was all but destroyed.

In the course of their long journey, the Kiowas "had acquired horses, the sun dance religion, and a certain love and possession of the prairies" (28). Their defeat led to the loss of the prairies, to the

prohibition of the sun dance, and to "the loss of [the] horse, [the] hunting horse, a loss that involved the very life's blood of the culture" (50). It occurred precisely at the moment in which it seemed that the Kiowas had realized their nomadic dream, at the very point and place of its fulfillment, where they had become, through the acquisition of the horse, "centaurs in their spirit" (28). The horse became for them a "sacred notion" (155) which entered into their tribal myths. It became a symbol of their wandering into the prairies and penetrating into the land where "there is no confinement, only wonder and beauty" (28). It was the means through which the Kiowas were able to respond to "the deep impulse to run and rove upon the wild earth" (36), the impulse in which they "realized the culmination of a culture peculiarly vital, native, and distinct, however vulnerable and ill-fated" (28).

Ever since, the Kiowa culture has been mortified by the violence and outrages of the white man, and debased by modern civilization. Yet it still persists through words and names, whose ancient resonances are able to evoke the old sacred world full of visions, nature, earth and stars, the passionate dream of a primitive unifying happiness.

This dream, never completely repressed, is relived in the oral tradition in all its power of "emotional instinct."<sup>1</sup> Orality, thus, manifests itself as a "primeval mystery" that eludes all rational logic and objectivity. The Native American writer is confronted with the old fear of loss and emptiness which is heightened by a sense of impotence when oral tradition dictates the structure and flow of the written word; experimenting with orality means being caught up in the "vertigo of the past," being aware of another presence which, as Momaday writes, expands further and further beyond definition.

In this kind of prehistoric and impenetrable genesis, full of "isolated, yet fragmented and confused, images" (61), Momaday finds once again the true and original word, the word of the beginning of which Genesis speaks and which Momaday reevokes also in *House Made of Dawn*. Here Momaday invokes the truth and fertile power of the uttered word in stark contrast to the sterility and fragmentation of modern language. The white man "is sated and insensitive; his regard for language—for the Word itself—as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return" (89).

While drawing us back towards remote and lost echoes, the oral

tradition simultaneously indicates new realities that are striving to emerge. It is not a case, however, of nostalgia on the part of today's Native American writers, but rather an awareness of the creative powers rooted in their own culture and language. Through this awareness, Native American writers can investigate the past in order to regain their lost identity, which is not only their personal identity but that of their whole people.

Reaching into his past, Momaday relives in *The Names* the most significant moments which have molded "the bright legend" (154) of his youth. At the same time, by tracing the history of his family through four generations, he draws together facts and myths of the whole tribe. He creates a mosaic of historical facts and mythical happenings that offer unexpected similarities: memories which seemed to have been lost are recalled to give shape to the present. He gathers up the ancient voices that have been transmitted by word of mouth and which represent the cultural inheritance of the tribe. Memories and ancestral chants deposited in the clarity of original nature fill him with a sort of primitive wonder.

Storytelling, for Momaday, is a passionate and exhilarating wandering in search of creative and traditional forms of expression. It is characterized by momentary intuitions and illuminations, by visions which crystallize, in a shattering emotion, "the vibrant ecstasy of so much being" (154).

A vast network of identities is developed, giving language a metaphorical tension that culminates in a final vision. The whole of history, the totality of visions, is condensed in the final image. Moving against the grain of time, the writer recaptures the mythical image of the origins of the Kiowas, allowing him to touch, in a pool of light, "the fallen tree, the hollow log there in the thin crust of the ice" (167).

In this way, Momaday confirms the infinite value of the intuitive vision. The creative act of storytelling is like the riding of the horse, a long and reinvigorating journey of the mind across culture and language in order to grasp the meaning of his "racial life" (155), to possess wholly and immediately "a force that has been set in motion at the Beginning" (48). He can thus acquire a new voice and recapture the vital imaginative power of his ancestral past.

Leslie Marmon Silko's mixed ancestry, as in the case of Moma-

day, has sharpened her awareness of Indian resources. Faithfulness to tradition in the attachment to the ancient voices as a reaction against white man's intrusion into Native culture finds utterance in her work, *Storyteller*.

The title story is set in Alaska, where the writer lived for many years. While it might seem strange for a Laguna Indian to write about a landscape so alien from her native one, as she herself declares, Silko wants to represent the ever-vital, universal relationship that bonds man to the earth (Coltelli). Like Momaday and Erdrich, Silko makes herself the promoter of an all-embracing humanism that sees in the return to nature and origins the only way of attaining the knowledge that leads to poetic expression. *Storyteller* is a denunciation of Western civilization which, in the name of progress and false myths, has destroyed the innocence of the primitive world and the equilibrium of the natural environment.

The structure of the story reveals a constant opposition between nature and culture on the two principal levels. On the first paradigmatic level, the conflict between Indian culture and white culture demonstrates that, by undermining the original Indian culture and mortifying individual identity, the white man has created a fracture in Native society. This fracture is evident in Silko's description of her characters. They are nameless, mere types characterized according to psychological qualities and symbolic roles.

The old man is the ancient storyteller who tells the mythical and pivotal story of the hunter and the giant bear. From the first to the last line of *Storyteller*, his story unfolds fragment by fragment as if in a dream in imitation of ancient rhythms. "On and on in a soft singing voice, the old man caressed the story, repeating the words again and again like gentle strokes" (27). His voice moves inexorably towards the final clash in which is revealed the superiority of the bear, symbol of the power of nature, over man. The old woman bears the signs of intense suffering inflicted by the whites. "Her knees and knuckles were swollen grotesquely" (19), says the old man—and the old woman adds in a low voice "whispering like wind across the roof" that "the joints are swollen with anger" (19). The attorney represents white justice, which is incapable of understanding the Indian girl's sense of guilt. Yet to her, he is a likeable fellow: "She laughed when she saw how the jailer

would be forced by this Gussuck [i.e., white man] to speak Yupik to her. She liked the Gussuck attorney for that, and for the thinning hair on his head" (31). The storeman, whose predecessor had been responsible for the death of the girl's parents, represents the cynical outrages of the white man against Indian culture. He also "hated the people because they had something of value, something which the Gussucks could never have" (29). The principle character, the Indian girl, too, is nameless. She represents the modern storyteller who is aware of the role she has to fulfill and accepts the responsibility of transmitting the cultural inheritance of her people, respecting the truth and acting in accordance with the traditional art of storytelling (Coltelli).

The fracture created in Indian society by the coming of the white man can readily be seen in Silko's description of the landscape of Alaska. She renders the essence of an entire society which once possessed the knowledge of how to achieve mental harmony by adapting and thereby surviving in this stark environment. In the boundless white horizon of the Bering Sea, the Indians had acquired extraordinary perceptive faculties that enable them to assimilate the hidden secrets of things and the subtlest variations of natural phenomena. By observing the green colors of the horizon the girl could tell "how the cold would come: when the boundaries were gone the polar ice would range across the land into the sky" (27). By means of brief hints, Silko recalls images of a past world of human dignity and primeval liberty. In this world, every human activity was stamped with a sacred rite. Hunting and fishing were not destructive acts in the modern sense, but rather rituals undertaken after long periods of apprenticeship and endurance. These activities and their inherent values disappear with the intrusion of the white man. "After all those years away at school, they had forgotten how to set nets in the river and where to hunt seals in the fall" (22).

In opposition to this harmonious world, Silko casts the corruption and impotence of the whites and their arrogant disregard for nature. Silko observes all this with an ironical eye. For instance, when she describes the portable buildings the whites bring in their search for oil ("they thought they could keep out the cold with stringy yellow wadding" 18), or when she writes of "the big yellow machines and the giant drill" the whites use to drill their test holes, and comments: "The

metal froze; it split and shattered. Oil hardened and moving parts jammed solidly... The cold stopped them, and they were helpless against it" (18). Silko also shows the negative effects of the whites man's indiscriminate exploitation of nature which upsets the natural equilibrium and reduces the possibilities of survival: "That year the Gussuk boats had come, firing big guns at the walrus and seals. There was nothing left to hunt after that anyway" (25).

On the second paradigmatic level, the tale reveals the opposition between myth and reality. It is only apparently an opposition, for Silko's vision reflects the insights of twentieth century thinkers on the nature of myth: that is, myth is not fiction but the trace of a true story which is precious because sacred and meaningful. This opposition highlights the psychological conflict of the Native American today. Silko presents this conflict in the alienated, almost schizophrenic behavior of the Indian girl who, constrained to live in a white-dominated reality, must fight to remain faithful to her ancestral roots. In this sense, she is conscious of her diversity, even with regard to the society of the integrated Indian who passively, and for the sake of convenience, sides with the whites:

The dormitory matron pulled down her underpants and whipped her with leather belt because she refused to speak English... The other girls whispered in English. They knew how to work the showers, and they washed and curled their hair at night. (19-20)

In the background of the story there is the mythical tale of the "giant polar bear stalking a lone man across Bering Sea ice" (26)—a tale that dramatizes the doomed challenge of man alone against the forces of nature that finally defeat him. In the foreground there is the girl's contemporary experience, her challenge against the whites who, by means of deceit, had caused the death of her parents. The girl accomplishes her revenge without actually committing a crime, by luring the storeman into the traps of the frozen river with which only she is familiar. In so doing, she repeats the paradigmatic gesture of hunting, astutely imitates the inexorable attack of the bear and leads the white man to his death. Ignorant of the danger hidden in the frozen river, "he went straight across the ice, running the shortest distance to reach her... down to the instant that the ice flexed into hairline

fracture"; certain that he could outrun her, he continued to advance, but "the cracking bone-silver sounds gathered momentum with the opening ice until the churning gray water was set free" (30).

An analogy between the story of the bear that overcomes the hunter and the story of the girl who overcomes the white man is thus established. The girl, like the bear, knows how to decipher the signs of nature and how to use its power. Silko, the modern storyteller, transmits this knowledge, blending oral and written tradition to do so. She gives the contemporary experience of the girl a mythical dimension, thus eliminating the opposition between nature and culture, myth and reality.

The tortured desire for concrete proof concerning history and origin that we find in Native American literature can be seen in Momaday's reconstruction of his family tree. The storyteller's restless obsession with dates, time-span, and the emargination from the mainstream of history is reflected in Pohd-lohk, the old storyteller in *The Names*. His special regard for history leads him to keep a calendar history of the Kiowa people from 1833. This calendar of pictograms by means of which Pohd-lohk tries to "reckon his place in the world" (48) is considered by Momaday to be both the seed of a story and the tangible proof of Pohd-lohk's fear of losing himself in the unknown origin of his people. Pohd-lohk, with his "crude figure of a man covered with red spots" (49), fixes in his calendar the smallpox epidemic of the late 1830s, a historic event that is paradigmatic of the tragic consequences of white intrusion.

History is also a major preoccupation for Louise Erdrich, who in her epic three-volume family saga establishes a complex relationship between history, myth and literature. Nowhere in the trilogy is this more evident than in *Tracks*. In this novel, she recaptures the historical moment lived by her protagonists by drawing on oral tradition and by researching and meditating on the past. In this way, like the ancient muse of history, Erdrich connects the origin of her people, the Chippewas, to their present condition. She creates a never-ending time cycle weaving the lives of her people in and out of the processes of history.

*Tracks* tells the story of her tribe in a circumscribed time-span,

from 1912 to 1924. Yet, Erdrich goes beyond the historical confines of her narrative in order to embody in it the timelessness of her people's tradition. On the one hand, she tells of the decay and disgregation of entire families of the Chippewas under the burden of events that "saw more changes than in a hundred upon a hundred before" (2). On the other, she stresses the endurance of storytelling as an art which adjusts to the passing of time while adhering to its rules and laws. Carefully following the known facts, "it comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning" (31). This reshaping of the old into the new is the result of the Indian writer's efforts to accomplish a simultaneous interweaving and reciprocal transformation between orality and writing. Erdrich underlines this concept through the words of the old storyteller Nanapush, who becomes more and more aware of "this new way of wielding influence, this method of leading the others with a pen and a piece of paper" (209).

The historical background against which the story line of *Tracks* unfolds focuses on two main series of events: the epidemics of spotted and consumptive diseases, and the signing of the government treaties that allotted Indian lands. These events led to the breakdown of tribal ties through starvation, disease and interfamily feuds. This is the stage on which the story of the various Chippewa families is played out. *Tracks* shows how these families were consciously and dispassionately stripped of their lands, values, beliefs, and of their very being.

The drama unfolds in two settings. The first is the reservation centered on Matchimanito Lake, in whose waters lives the mythical Misshepeshu, "the water man, the monster," a devil and a "thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive" (11). It is the place which the Chippewas, exiled from the east, have invested with their myths and magic. The lake is surrounded by ancient and impenetrable forests pulsating with legends and peopled by the spirits of the Chippewas' ancestors. It has become their new homeland, where they can still hunt and fish, following ancient paths and animal tracks. It is a place which can be seen as the nucleus of and a metaphor for the tribal memory. Counterposed to the reservation is the second setting, the white town of Argus with its butcher's shop and slaughterhouse and the "slender steeple" (13) of the Catholic church. It is the place where the Chippewas go to work and where they are

confronted by the violence of the whites. The slaughterhouse becomes a metaphor for the brutal world outside the reservation.

Erdrich contrasts the two worlds in much the same way as Silko does. The mysterious, limitless beauty of the world of nature is juxtaposed to the starkness and sterility of the white man's settlement. Between these two poles, the slow decline of the Chippewa families unfolds as they struggle in vain to keep their land and maintain their identity. The story is told by two alternating narrators: old Nanapush and young Pauline. These two contrasting voices are used to convey broad political and historical issues that are channeled into seemingly personal points of view (Silberman). Nanapush is a survivor, wily and adaptable to the changing circumstances of his people, yet keeping faith with the old traditions and fully respecting the truth. Pauline, on the other hand, breaks away from her people and trades the legends of her tribe for those of Roman Catholicism.

The storytelling of Nanapush reconstructs and transmits the past and present tribulations of the Chippewas. His life revolves around storytelling, and is inseparable from it. Through the flow of his voice, stories of the old days intermingle with stories of the present—stories that are his own and his people's. Memory is the filter through which he distills and selects the material drawn from reality: "Every event has its own story, never visible while it is happening. Only after, when an old man sits dreaming and talking in his chair, the design springs clear... There is so much we saw and never knew" (34), Nanapush says, and "only looking back is there a pattern" (33).

This pattern is what the historian looks for when selecting the events in order to construct a narrative (White 1-42). Like the historian, Erdrich stresses the fictive character of historical reconstruction through Nanapush's ability to manoeuvre the facts into position. His voice not only recounts these facts as they stand, but pursues the psychological and emotional entanglements that guide life's events. It is as though he had an unconscious grasp of historical determinism. Erdrich projects this idea of determinism through many of the characters in *Tracks* as they act and react according to seemingly magical formulas. She accomplishes this in much the same way in which modern anthropology has investigated the relationship between magic and scientific knowledge, and has established a historical continuity

between the world of nature and the world of culture (Levi-Strauss, ch. 1).

Within this double mythical and historical dimension, Nanapush is like "a vine of a wild grape that twined the timbers and drew them closer" (33). He constantly theorizes on how to relate events within a kind of metastorytelling. Detached and objective, he traces the sequence of events in order to create an organic structure that is far removed from the fabular element usually ascribed to myth (Levi-Strauss, ch. 1). Nanapush's historical consciousness enables him to see the events in all their truth and reality. "Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step" (4). The "land is the only thing that lasts life to life," maintains Nanapush. Since his name has "got to do with trickery and living in the bush" (33), he thinks "like animals" and has "perfect understanding for where they hide" (40). "In my time," he says, "I have tracked a deer back through time and brush and cleared field, to the place it was born" (40). Through memory, he consciously relives the paradigmatic gesture of hunting and returns to the origins of his people. In this going back, following the deer's tracks, he symbolically retraces his people's history. He thus penetrates into a new dimension, the time of the eternal return of things and the cyclical vision of human life.

One of Nanapush's main preoccupations is to ensure the continuity of a tradition that is gradually eaten up by the whites, who buy or confiscate Chippewa land and level their woods. Thus Nanapush's storytelling to Lulu, his granddaughter, is like a river flowing over time and space, carrying with it not only the old wisdom linked to the earth but also the power of healing which is inherent in it: "I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the well and ebb and did not sink but were sustained" (166-67).

In contrast, Pauline reconstructs and transmits the facts through her divided self, torn as she is between two worlds. Her story is the subjective personalization of her own loss of roots and the disintegration of her entire people. While Nanapush's message has an intended listener, his grandchild Lulu through whom the collective memory of the Chippewas will survive, Pauline's story is an interior

monologue that traces her individual rejection of tradition and its final negation.

Like all mixed-blood women of whom Erdrich writes, Pauline is "the daughter of a mystery, an absence, a blown-apart society."<sup>2</sup> Her monologue is the detailed chronicle of this emargination, the progressive loss of identity and traumatic disintegration of the self. It traces the clash between two worlds and the resulting detachment from the beliefs of the past in order to embrace the white man's religion.

This detachment destroys that continuity between nature and culture which Nanapush's story weaves. Divorced from the rhythms of cyclical time, Pauline's individual, lonely journey is marked by a series of lacerations through which she both literally and metaphorically kills the Indian part of herself. Projected into a context of malignant forces, her past becomes a powerful emotional and instinctual force that constantly pulls her back. She counters this past, felt as all guilt and sin, with a future of grace and purity, in a progressive journey from the world of the senses towards an abstract ideal of religious life. Like Nanapush, Pauline also relives and retraces the traditional path of the old Anishinabe culture through memory. However, in stark contrast to Nanapush's path, the delirious one she follows has "no fences, no poles, no lines, no tracks" (159), except those of her misworn shoes, the shoes she wears on the wrong feet in order to mortify her flesh and to retrace the agony of Christ's last journey.

Erdrich places Pauline in the tradition of many other Indian heroines in American literature and cinema: she also deliberately and ironically confuses Pauline's history with that of the archetypal Indian woman, the sensual savage who marries the dashing white captain of literary tradition. Pauline's wandering between the reservation and the convent where she goes to do penance ends with her sanctification and recovery as the bride of Christ who, she observes, "will take me as wife, without death" (204).

The path of Erdrich's historical reconstruction is made up of a series of tracks. Only crumbs and fragments of past events and tracks of psychological or historical processes remain to bear witness to an entire past. These are the tracks of the Chippewas in their hunting and wandering in the woods, the tracks of animals which Nanapush interprets to trace the origins of his people. Through the filter of

Erdrich's irony and her comic narrative, we also see the tracks of Pauline's misworn shoes that trace the path of her lonely and distorted view of reality. Individual and collective memories intermingle and diverge through the two points of view. By this means the historical time setting, from 1912 to 1924, is invested with a mythological and cyclical dimension, while the narrative is anchored to a realistic representation of the destructive and nightmarish forces that govern historical events.

<sup>1</sup> Here, and elsewhere in this paragraph, I make use of Andrea Zanzotto's concepts regarding the relationship between orality and the unconscious as formulated in the afterword to his *Fila*. See Zanzotto 87-94.

<sup>2</sup> From a talk given by Louise Erdrich at a conference in Treviso, October 1991.

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