LEWIS HYDE

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

I. Coyote's Impulse

In the winter of 1929-30, Archie Phinney went to the Fort Lapwai Indian reservation in northeastern Idaho to record stories told by his sixty-year-old mother, Wayílatpu, a Nez Percé who spoke only her native tongue, no English. In 1934, Columbia University Press brought out Phinney's book, *Nez Percé Texts*, which records about forty of these tales with the native Shahaptian interlined by a literal translation, and followed by a free translation.

Phinney includes two versions of a story in which Coyote travels to the Land of the Dead. In the first, Coyote's daughter has been killed and Coyote follows her to the spirit world; he is allowed to try to carry her back to the world of the living, provided that he not look behind him on the way. He fails in this task. What follows here is the second version of the tale, in Phinney's free translation, after which I offer my own autobiographical reflection on this ancient motif of trying to recover the dead.

Coyote and the Shadow People

Coyote and his wife were dwelling there. His wife became ill. She died. Then Coyote became very, very lonely. He did nothing but weep for his wife.

There the death spirit came to him and said, "Coyote, do you pine for your wife?"

"Yes, friend, I long for her . . . ," replied Coyote.

"I could take you to the place where your wife has gone, but, I tell you, you must do everything just exactly as I say; not once are you to disregard my commands and do something else."

"Yes," replied Coyote, "yes, friend, and what could I do? I will do everything you say." There the ghost told him, "Yes. Now let us go."

Coyote added, "Yes, let it be so that we are going."

They went. There he said to Coyote again, "You must do whatever I say. Do not disobey."

"Yes, yes, friend. I have been pining so deeply, and why should I not heed you?" Coyote could not see the spirit clearly. He appeared to be only a shadow.

They started and went along over a plain. "Oh, there are many horses; it looks like a roundup," exclaimed the ghost.

"Yes," replied Coyote, though he really saw none, "yes, there are many horses."

They had arrived now near the place of the dead. The ghost knew that Coyote could see nothing, but he said, "Oh look, such quantities of service berries! Let us pick some to eat. Now when you see me reach up, you too will reach up, and when I bend the limb down, you too will pull your hands down."

"Yes," Coyote said to him, "so be it that thus I will do." The ghost reached up and bent the branch down and Coyote did the same. Although he could see no berries, he imitated the ghost in putting his hand to and from his mouth in the manner of eating. Thus they picked and ate berries. Coyote watched him carefully and imitated every action. When the ghost would put his hand into his mouth, Coyote did the same. "Such good service berries these are," commented the ghost.

"Yes, friend, it is good that we have found them," agreed Coyote. "Now let us go." And they went on.

"We are about to arrive," the ghost told him. "There is a long, very, very long lodge. Your wife is there somewhere. Just wait and let me ask someone." In a little while the ghost returned and said to Coyote, "Yes, they have told me where your wife is. We are coming to a door through which we will enter. You will do in every way exactly what you see me do. I will take hold of the door flap, raise it up, and, bending low, will enter. Then you too will take hold of the door flap and do the same." They proceeded in this manner now to enter.

It happened that Coyote's wife was sitting right near the entrance. The ghost said to Coyote, "Sit here beside your wife." They both sat. The ghost added, "Your wife is now going to prepare food for us." Coyote could see nothing, except that he was sitting there on an open prairie where nothing was in sight; yet he could feel the presence of the shadow. "Now she has prepared our food. Let us eat." The ghost reached down and then brought his hand to his mouth. Coyote could see nothing but the prairie dust. They ate. Coyote imitated all the movements of his companion. When they had finished and the woman had apparently put the food away, the ghost said to Coyote, "You stay here. I must go around to see some people."

He went out, but he returned soon. "Here we have conditions different from those you have in the land of the living. When it gets dark here it has dawned in your land, and when it dawns for us it is growing dark for you." And now it began to grow dark and Coyote seemed to hear people whispering, talking in faint tones, all around him. Then darkness set in. Oh, Coyote saw many fires in a longhouse. He saw that he was in a very, very large lodge

and there were many fires burning. He saw the various people. They seemed to have shadowlike forms, but he was able to recognize different persons. He saw his wife sitting by his side.

He was overjoyed, and he joyfully greeted all his old friends who had died long ago. How happy he was! He would march down the aisles between the fires, going here and there, and talk with the people. He did this throughout the night. Now he could see the doorway through which his friend and he had entered. At last it began to dawn and his friend came to him and said, "Coyote, our night is falling and in a little while you will not see us. But you must stay right here. Do not go anywhere at all. Stay right here and then in the evening you will see all these people again."

"Yes, friend. Where could I possibly go? I will spend the day here."

The dawn came and Coyote found himself alone sitting there in the middle of a prairie. He spent the day there, just dying from the heat, parching from the heat, thirsting from the heat. Coyote stayed there several days. He would suffer through the day but always at night he would make merry in the great lodge.

One day his ghost friend came to him and said, "Tomorrow you will go home. You will take your wife with you."

"Yes, friend, but I like it here so much. I am having a good time and I should like to remain here."

"Yes," the ghost replied; "nevertheless you will go tomorrow, and you must guard against your inclination to do foolish things. Do not yield to any queer notions. I will advise you now what you are to do. There are five mountains. You will travel for five days. Your wife will be with you but you must never, never touch her. Do not let any strange impulses possess you. You may talk to her but never touch her. Only after you have crossed and descended from the fifth mountain you may do whatever you like."

"Yes, friend," replied Coyote.

When dawn came again, Coyote and his wife started. At first it seemed to him as if he were going alone, yet he was dimly aware of his wife's presence as she walked along behind. They crossed one mountain and, now, Coyote could feel more definitely the presence of his wife; like a shadow she seemed. They went on and crossed the second mountain. They camped at night at the foot of each mountain. They had a little conical lodge which they would set up each time. Coyote's wife would sit on one side of the fire and he on the other. Her form appeared clearer and clearer.

The death spirit, who had sent them, now began to count the days and to figure the distance Coyote and his wife had covered. "I hope that he will do everything right and take his wife through to the world beyond," he kept saying to himself.

Here Coyote and his wife were spending their last night, their fourth camping, and on the morrow she would again assume fully the character of a living person. They were camping for the last time and Coyote could see her very clearly as if she were a real person who sat opposite him. He

could see her face and body very clearly, but only looked and dared not touch her.

But suddenly a joyous impulse seized him; the joy of having his wife again overwhelmed him. He jumped to his feet and rushed over to embrace her. His wife cried out, "Stop! Stop! Coyote! Do not touch me. Stop!" Her warning had no effect. Coyote rushed over to his wife, and just as he touched her body she vanished. She disappeared—returned to the shadowland.

When the death spirit learned of Coyote's folly, he became deeply angry. "You inveterate doer of this kind of thing! I told you not to do anything foolish. You, Coyote, were about to establish the practice of returning from death. Only a short time away the human race is coming, but you have spoiled everything and established for them death as it is."

Here Coyote wept and wept. He decided, "Tomorrow I shall return to see them again." He started back the following morning and as he went along he began to recognize the places where he and his spirit friend had passed before. He found the place where the ghost had seen the herd of horses, and now he began to do the same things they had done on their way to the shadowland. "Oh, look at the horses; it looks like a roundup." He went on until he came to the place where the ghost had found the service berries. "Oh, such choice service berries! Let us pick and eat some." He went through the motions of picking and eating berries.

He went on and finally came to the place where the long lodge had stood. He said to himself, "Now when I take hold of the door flap and raise it up, you must do the same." Coyote remembered all the little things his friend had done. He saw the spot where he had sat before. He went there, sat down, and said, "Now, your wife has brought us food. Let us eat." He went through the motions of eating again. Darkness fell, and now Coyote listened for the voices, and he looked all around; he looked here and there, but nothing appeared. Coyote sat there in the middle of the prairie. He sat there all night, but the lodge didn't appear again nor did the ghost ever return to him.

II. An Old Story

For some years I have been writing a book about the mythology of trickster figures like Coyote. (The trickster, the rule-breaker, is found in most mythological systems: in Greece there is Hermes the thief, in the Norse myths there is Loki the mischief maker, in China there is the King of the Monkeys, and so forth.) At one point in this project, after having done considerable reading, I sat down to write a short description of what I hoped would be the central themes and shape of the book I wanted to write. At the time I had been browsing in the old Greek poems known as the Homeric Hymns, and when I finished the proposal I appended as an epigraph a line spoken by Apollo in one of the hymns:

"The muses sing of the sufferings of men...,
How they live witless and helpless and cannot
Find healing for death or defense against old age."

It was late winter at the time. My wife and I were living in a rented house near the Cape Cod lighthouse in North Truro, Massachusetts, and when I finished typing I walked out into the constant wind and stood at the edge of the high scarp over the Atlantic, privately weeping with relief for having written out the shape of the book at last, and with some obscure sadness or fatigue triggered by Apollo's scornful voice and woven into the project in ways I didn't then understand.

That night I had a dream in which I retrieved a dead child from the underworld. Up into the darkened central hallway of a middle-class home I carried the shade of some woman's baby. I was in a rage at this woman. I saw my hands close around her beautiful throat just before I woke up, tense and shaken.

My family moved to England five years after the end of the Second World War. In London, bright fireweed bloomed in the open cellar holes of bombed buildings. My parents brought with them a 1949 Chevrolet with green fenders as thick and shiny as porcelain plates. The dollar was strong, as they say, and the grounds of the house we rented in a village outside of London included a tennis court, an apple orchard, a playhouse with leaded diamond windows, and a bomb shelter inside of which the gardener forced rhubarb and on top of which sat the landlady's two marble Buddhas, which my brother and I chipped at with a hammer for their fabulous flakes of soapy white stone.

My parents had a third child while we lived in England—Edith, born in December of 1950, when I was five years old. Twenty months later, Edith died. A mosquito bite had infected her with an encephalitis they then called African sleeping sickness. She fell into a coma. During the week or so she lived I was allowed to go once with my parents to visit her in the hospital. I can still see her lying on the white bed, her lips moving in an odd, reflexive way, as if sucking. As I watched, her lips stopped moving and I secretly thought perhaps I had seen her die. At the funeral my older brother Lee wept, but I did not. I was jealous of his tears, but felt none of my own. I heard them say I was "too young to understand," whereas Lee "loved Edith very much." After the funeral we had to sit in the Chevrolet by the churchyard while adults leaned toward the windows to talk to my parents. After that at the evening dinner table Mother would sometimes rise, twisting her napkin in her hands, and walk into the darkened living room, Father following behind. Lee and I later broke out with boils; I had a nasty one on my right calf that soaked its loose white bandage with pus. We were sent away for a while to stay with some woman who owned a guitar which, if I did not leave the couch where it lay, I was allowed to strum.

I have sometimes imagined that an early experience of death turns a soul toward art. Reading that Flannery O'Connor's father died when she was young, I thought, yes, no wonder she gave herself to those remarkable fictions of loss and redemption. I realize this is a little simpleminded; no one claims such vocational causes when death marks the childhood of supermarket managers or auto mechanics. But it is *my* simplemindedness; in my story death and art have run in tandem. Long after those years in England my mother, reminiscing, once said to me, "After Edith died I needed a baby, and you were there." I think we fell into a silent reciprocity, she and I. In return for her renewed attentions I set out to relieve her of her sorrow. I became her willing anodyne, and whatever talents I had in terms, say, of reading subtle signs of grief and pleasure, I gave over to that end. In retrospect at least, to see how my unconscious choice of that epigraph in Apollo's mocking voice was followed so quickly by that dream leads me to wonder whether my adult attentions were not still bound up in that task, as if at this remove of years I still hoped that the exercise of my talents might somehow lift Edith's soul from the grave and return it to sunny England with its lupines in spring and its young queen.

Surely the old sorrow of all this was present as I stood in the wind that evening, but I now think it was mixed as well with the sentimentality of a grown man still attached to the child's grandiose mission even as he longs to be quit of it. The dream, at least, picks up the latter theme and elaborates it with a vengeance. The situation is adult, sexual (that beautiful throat), and I am in a lethal rage at the woman I have tried to help, as if when Orpheus walked into the sunlight and turned to look back at Eurydice it was not doubt that moved him, but resentment. Who is she to have made him charm old Charon with song and pacify that three-headed dog guarding the distant shore? Who is she that he let his art be drawn into this hopeless enterprise? And yet to imagine this Orpheus-resentment is to dwell on the anger of the dream, and that seems the wrong tack, for the anger, after all, wakes me up. Some change of consciousness seems to be called for, some jump in the narrative. Perhaps there is resentment in the Orphic stories, but the makers of those stories knew a wider range of feeling than that. In the parallel Coyote story from North America, when Coyote's impulsiveness sends his wife's spirit back to the Land of the Dead, the Death Spirit scolds him: "You inveterate doer of this kind of thing . . . ! Only a short time away the human race is coming, but you have spoiled everything and established for them death as it is." The makers of that story knew death as it is, not as we might wish it. They knew we live in Coyote's world where sexual impulse and mortality are one thing, not two. The dreamer who must wake from the dream in anger does not know that, for he has tried to do what Orpheus never did, what Coyote never did. Nor can that dreamer find a way out of the plot he's entered, at least not so long as he stays inside his dream.

In the coal fields of West Virginia there are abandoned mines—their entrances long closed, the nearby towns long impoverished—that have caught on fire. These fires are impossible to put out; slowly they burn through the seams of coal, thirty or forty years. How wonderful if the writer of a book should happen on a topic with such longevity! At times he'll wish he'd picked some simpler theme, something he could strip-mine in a season, or something that would flash up and die down in a matter of months so that he could publish and get on. Get on with what, though? Better to be enveloped in a matter that darkly feeds itself with hidden fires; better not to know fully where the veins of fascination lead, but to trust that they will slowly give up their heat in recompense for attention paid. Certainly, in considering my topic again with these memories and reflections in mind I found that they informed one another in several ways. For one thing, I realized that framing my project with Apollo's voice indicated some confusion of purpose, for it was not Apollo, nor those above-it-all Muses, who drew me to this work, but tricksters like Hermes and Coyote, figures much more earthy. To feel the call of those lofty voices is to be drawn into their scorn, which means to turn against this world, where humans die the way they do. To respond is to hope once more that the dead might return. Small wonder, then, that trying to work out my themes had left me feeling sad and spent, for in my confusion I was working still on a task not really my own (it was my mother's grief, not mine), and impossible besides.

I had forgotten, in other words, that in the Greek myths Hermes as a child sets himself against Apollo, that tricksters in general begin by muddying high gods. To return to such lowliness shifts the work away from idealist or Apollonian artistry (and its effort) and toward some trickster artistry (and its playfulness). Trickster's style is not so heavy, not so elevated. He cracks dirty jokes at the funeral. Moreover, to work in his spirit is to be less obedient to "the parents," less likely to be drawn into their tasks. The baby Hermes turns out to be a thief, and for this his mother chastises him; she has a clear image of what he is and, by implication, an image of what she'd prefer him to be. But her preferences do not move him. The Hermes story imagines an infant so fully independent that he never plays a part to please his parents, never puts on a mask his elders have designed. In the story about Coyote going to the Land of the Dead we might get the feeling that a "proper" Coyote would have been able to contain his impulses, but the story is no argument for propriety. It is surely sad when his desires escape him and disaster follows, but it would have been sadder had he contained himself, as it is sad whenever men or women become so well behaved that no joyous impulse ever disturbs their lives.

In all of this, trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfections, not some more elevated and purified realm. But they are not, therefore, tragic. Coyote is weeping and alone after his trip to the Land of the Dead, but in his wider story he is the great survivor who picks up and goes on, his impulses intact. Tricksters make this world and then they play with its materials. In fact, it may be exactly because these stories do

not wish away or deny what seems low, dirty, and imperfect that their hero enjoys such playful freedom. Trickster is the great shape-shifter, which I take to mean not so much that he shifts the shape of his own body but that, given the materials of this world, he demonstrates the degree to which the way we shape them may be altered. There is the given of death, the given of waterfalls and sunlight, of sleep and impulse, but there is also an intelligence able to form the givens into a remarkable number of designs. There is no healing for death, but it does not follow that humans must "live witless."

Still, it is the wit to reshape the story that seems unavailable to the frustrated dreamer of my dream, a man trapped in a tale that no longer serves, one he cannot escape—at least not until he wakes, not until some psychopomp comes along to help him cross the line, out of that dream where the stuff of a life (dead baby, grieving mother, grown man's art) seems so tightly knit together, and into a shiftier consciousness where old stories fall apart so that new ones may form from the fragments. (Maybe that isn't my sister's soul the dreamer retrieves; maybe it's the baby Hermes, maybe it's a child of my own, or a returning portion of my boyhood; maybe it's the "baby, baby" in an old blues song....) The guide of souls who allows a plot to be deeply rearranged is rarely an obvious actor in most stories, for durable stories are self-containing, self-defended against change and fragmentation. The ego protects its dreamlands. The high gods set guard dogs around their sacred meadows. If there is to be a change, then, its agent will have to hypnotize those dogs and slip in from the shadows, like an embarrassing impulse, like a cunning pathogen, a love affair, or a shameless thief taking a chance.

WORK CITED

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